

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA)

17 September 2025

Highlights: The hearing marked the 50th anniversary of ISDEAA, a landmark law that shifted federal Indian policy from termination to Tribal self-governance, allowing tribes to administer federal programs tailored to their communities. Senator Tina Smith and witness Jay Spaan spoke on the importance of expanding self-governance authority to USDA programs.

Witnesses:

- [Victor Joseph](#), Executive director of the Tanana Tribal Council
- [Chuck Hoskin Jr.](#), Principal chief of the Cherokee Nation
- [Ben Smith](#), Acting director of the HHS Indian Health Service
- [Jay Spaan](#), Executive director of the Self-Governance Communication & Education Tribal Consortium
- [Kennis Bellmard](#), Deputy assistant Interior secretary for policy and economic development

Key Points:

- The consultation focused mainly on healthcare, education and infrastructure, but there were mentions of food sovereignty and USDA programs.
- [Senator Tina Smith \(D-MN\)](#) emphasized the need to expand self-governance authority to USDA programs such as Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and Tribal food sovereignty initiatives.
 - Senator Smith noted that many federal agencies lack understanding of 638 authorities, which hinders progress on nutrition-related self-governance.
- Tribal Self-Governance's Jay Spaan called for expanding self-governance to USDA programs which would reduce grant-related administrative burdens, empower Tribes to tailor nutrition programs to their communities, and align with broader goals of efficiency, sovereignty, and culturally appropriate service delivery.
 - He also recommended ensuring full, stable funding for all eligible programs, mandating Tribal consultation before policy changes, fixing payment systems to avoid delays in fund transfers, and educate federal staff on ISDEAA and Tribal sovereignty.