

House Committee on Natural Resources

Making Federal Economic Development Programs Work in Indian Country

3 February 2026

Highlights:

The Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs held an oversight hearing on how federal economic development programs are functioning in Indian Country. Lawmakers and Tribal leaders examined whether these programs help or hinder Tribal economic growth. There was no specific mention of agriculture operations, but conversations centered heavily on SBA 8(a) programs, access to capital, CDFIs, loan guarantee programs, and federal contracting. There were also many calls for increased Tribal control in the administration of economic development programs.

Key Points:

- Federal programs are often overly complex, poorly publicized, and not designed for small or rural Tribes.
- Tribes struggle with grant awareness, staffing capacity, slow federal processes, and inflexible program requirements.
- Witnesses emphasized the need for Tribal self-determination, better federal consultation, and more predictable timelines for funding and approvals.

Witness highlights:

[Hope Silvas- Shivwits Band of Paiutes](#)

- Small Tribes frequently miss opportunities because federal agencies do not notify them effectively, often emailing outdated leadership contacts.
- Many programs require matching funds or capacity that small Tribes do not have.
- Administrative burdens force the Tribe to pursue their own legislation to overcome bureaucratic barriers.

[Rodney Butler- Native American Finance Officers Association \(NAFOA\)](#)

- GAO and NAFOA found widespread issues with federal grants, including delayed guidance, unclear rules, poor communication, and inadequate Tribal-specific data.
- Agencies often do not even know how much federal assistance reaches Tribes.

- Mr. Butler highlighted the Treasury Department as a model for meaningful consultation.

[Derrick Watchman- National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development \(NCAIED\)](#)

- Some federal programs authorized years ago still are not functioning (e.g., the Office of Native American Business Development).
- Funding pauses and staff cuts—such as BIA halting tourism funds—have caused layoffs and program failures.
- Smaller Tribes lack staff to navigate federal red tape.

[Haven Harris- Native American Contractors Association \(NACA\)](#)

- Stressed the importance of the SBA 8(a) program, which funds essential services like elder benefits and infrastructure in remote Native communities.
- Native 8(a) contracting generated \$26.2B in FY2024, much of which supported operations at the Department of Defense.
- In remote Alaska communities with extremely high costs of living, federal contracting is “economic survival.”

Member discussions:

- Representatives Leger Fernandez and Huffman criticized the administration for pausing funding, cutting staff, attacking the 8(a) program, and rescinding Tribal economic tools.
- Representative Hageman focused on sovereignty, safety, and long-term Tribal leasing (H.R. 5910).
- Representatives Westerman, Randall, and Walberg questioned witnesses about barriers to program access, data gaps, and impacts on both small and large Tribes.