

## House Appropriations Subcommittee

March 17, 2026

### **American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing (Day1, Morning Session)**

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#### **Opening Statements:**

Rep. Mike Simpson, Chairman (R-ID)

- These hearings are important and appreciate to hear from an unprecedented number (around 100) of Tribes and Tribal organizations requesting to be part of the hearings.
- Indian Country is a bipartisan priority for the subcommittee and commit to honor treaty and trust responsibilities.

Rep. Chellie Pingree, Ranking Member (D-ME)

- Appreciate the time taken by the Tribal leaders and reps to provide insight to Congress regarding the 2027 Appropriations Bill.

#### **Highlights:**

- Witnesses raised concerns about ongoing funding issues and impacts of recent funding cuts to BIA, BIE an IHS programs and services. These funding impacts have affected Tribal affordable housing, law enforcement, education, health and social services as well as recruitment and retention of vital employment in Tribal communities. Most requested full funding for FY2027.

#### **Witness Statements:**

Darrell Seki, Sr., Chairman (Red Lake Nation)

- Friendly reminder of Federal government's responsibility to uphold agreements outlined in the treaties and U.S. Constitution.
- Community has unique needs that requires robust funding for Indian Affairs; reject the President's proposed cuts to critical agencies. Need mandatory funding, not discretionary.
- Requests:
  1. Fully fund BIA and BIE as supported by Tribal Interior Budget Council.
  2. Continued support for Tiwahe Initiative for Tribal members' safety; make it permanent and expand it so all Tribal members have the same opportunities.
  3. Keep our community safe from Non-Indian drug dealers; need support in expanding special criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians – fully fund BIA public safety programs. Overturn Olyphant law of 1978.
  4. Fully fund Indian Health Service at \$74 billion to expand self-governance and non-HIS programs.
  5. Enact full and robust pay costs.

Michael Fairbanks, Chairman (White Earth Nation)

- Top priority for White Earth is restoring the Tamarack National Refuge.
- Main focus is natural resources and stewardship of our lands.
- Before September 30, 2026, we ask for robust funding for all Tribal transportation programs to help Tribal members move easier within the reservation.
- Environmental justice and protection of treaty resources are important in fighting for water and future of our children so it's necessary to think about the impacts of projects that cut into the ground.

Virgil Wind, Chief Executive (Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe)

- Here reminding the federal government of its trust and treaty obligations and that they must be upheld.
- Requests:
  1. Fully fund BIA and BIE at \$27.1 billion as Indian Country programs are critically underfunded, resulting in reduced healthcare services, weak public safety efforts, and fewer educational opportunities for our members.
  2. Continue providing resources for Native American languages and BIE schools.
  3. Tribal Policy parity – need to fund Tribal policy programs.
  4. Fully fund Indian Health Services at \$63 billion.
- Mille Lacs is at a critical point and we need help to figure out how to work things out.

Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN)

- Federal government needs guidance to get things right in light of all the cuts that are happening.

Rep. Chellie Pingree

- Appreciates the importance of preserving indigenous language and urged Rep. Simpson to join in the effort.

Bruce Savage, Chairman (Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa)

- Vital that Congress pass a budget that “provides federal agencies that are historically underfunded with increased funding to support Tribes.”
  1. Fire safety in BIA has been funded far too low for over 20 years.
  2. Need to increase funding for forest inventory and environmental protection so funding for EPA is vital – Congress must continue to support and increase funding.
  3. Need more funding to support and expand food security to support Tribal foods, access to historical foods, and Indigenous food hubs programs.
  4. In light of consolidating federal programs, Congress needs to ensure that when programs move then funding moves with them.

5. This committee should fund staffing across BIA, BIE, and HIS so that the federal government can fulfill its trust and treaty responsibilities.

Austin Lowes, Chairman (Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians Tribe of Chippewa Indians and Michigan's Upper Peninsula)

- Current levels of BIA social services funding remain far below what's needed. BIA funding needs to cover children services, elder services, general welfare, and burial assistance. Social services must be funded at the same levels as public safety programs.
- Congress must fully fund Tribal court-based budgets consistent with the BIA zone model. BIA operational funding has remained stagnant despite rising costs for salaries, insurance, transportation, and food.
- Better coordination among BIA, IHS, and DOJ consistent with the Tribal Law and Order Act is essential. This subcommittee should direct these agencies to report on efforts to coordinate and improve programs related to public safety, justice, and behavioral health in Indian Country.

Winnay Wemigwase, Chairperson (Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians)

- Tribal priorities for more federal funding in support of IHS and Tribal healthcare programs.
- Congress must provide mandatory funding for contract support costs and deeply concerned that IHS is chronically underfunded falling short of meeting the healthcare needs of Native people.
- Congress must increase funding for HIS above Fiscal Year 2026 levels and continue to provide advance appropriations.
- Also need additional federal funding for Public Safety and Justice needs to address terminations in Little Traverse.
- Policy department relies heavily on federal funding yet FY2026 only saw funding for \$150,471 – enough to cover one officer's salary and benefits.
- Much larger funding for BIA public safety programs is urgently needed for FY2027 – funding that will help address affordable housing for the purposes of recruiting and retaining police officers.

John Johnson, Sr., President (Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians)

- Subcommittee must write President Trump to urge him to lift remaining hiring freezes at DOI, DHHS, and EPA – vacant employee positions result in delayed receipt of federal funds.
  1. Address the disparity between \$3 billion NCAI estimate and current funding levels of \$570 million to these programs. Tribes lose their trained policy officers to State Sheriff's Departments where they get higher paying jobs.
  2. Double the current Tiwahe program budget, which would improve Tribes' ability to provide alternatives to incarceration, social services programs, counseling, etc.

3. Increase the Johnsonville Valley Assistance Grants Program by at least 25% for culturally appropriate classroom activities.
4. Increase post-secondary scholarships and adult education program grants by at least 25% - Tribe continues to fall short of students' needs.
5. Increase funding for Native American language immersion programs.
6. Increase funding to sanitation facilities construction accounts, so that old septic, sewer, and water lines serving reservations can be replaced. Consider dedicated funding within IHS.
7. Increase the rights protection implementation program and Tribal Management Development Program by at least 20%.

Rep. Tom Cole, Full Committee Chairman (R-OK)

- Remains committed to ensuring the federal government upholds its trust responsibilities to Native Americans.
- Will continue to work closely with the Subcommittee Chair and Ranking Member to ensure provision of services, resources and advancements needed throughout Indian Country.
- Asked the witnesses about the biggest infrastructure challenges. Responses:
  - Bruce Savage: Sanitation is a big problem and causes us to adjust housing guidelines.
  - Winnay Wemigwase: affordable housing to help retain consequential employees like doctors, nurses, and law enforcement officers.
  - Austin Lowes: All forms of housing – emergency housing, transitional housing, permanent, supportive housing, home ownership opportunity, low-income housing, and elder housing. Second is healthcare infrastructure.
- Indian housing should be raised in Transportation, Housing and Urban Development. But agrees something must be done per his observations in most reservations.
- What income level is needed and what would happen if the income level is raised?
  - John Johnson: Median income in the north where most of the Tribes are is \$50,000 but most Tribal members earn between \$20 and \$30,000 per year. Also funding for language programs at \$13 million end up being \$2,000 for each of the 575 Tribes.

Jason Schlender, Executive Administrator (Great Lake City and Fish and Wildlife Commission)

- Five Intertribal Commission calculated about \$66 million for FY2027 to meet their basic needs.

Aja DeCoteau, Executive Director (Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission)

- Our Tribes are internationally recognized leaders in salmon restoration, managing one of the largest fishery recovery efforts in the nation.

- For FY2027 request that the Rights Protection Implementation (RPI) be funded at \$66 million (includes \$6.4 million for fisheries management)
- Need BIA-based funding increases to match the growth of CRIFC overall management responsibilities of Tribal programs.
- \$2.059 million for fishing access site operation improvements.
- \$7.42 million for Tribal support for the US Canada Pacific Salmon Treaty to keep Tribes at international tables.
- \$555,000 for youth program initiatives.
- \$2.18 million for Columbia river
- \$200,000 in recurring funds for victim's advocate program for Tribal citizens along the Columbia River.
- \$130,000 in a one-time appropriation in FY2027 for a canine unit.

Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK)

- What are 2 or 3 of the most important things that would make material difference re salmon restoration:
  - Aja DeCoteau: Similar to the previous panel, lack of affordable housing as well as Columbia River fisheries management impact Tribal citizens greatly.
  - Jason Schlender: Maintain our funding so we can remain competitive in providing services to our Tribes.

Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN)

- What has happened with the US Forest Service, US Geological Survey and other Federal agencies because of cuts in funding? What are you unable to do and the impacts of the EPA cuts:
  - Jason Schlender: lack of staff means there are no people there to address issues that arise for Tribes, delaying services, communication and correspondence.

Ashton Picard, Vice-Chairman (Nez Perce Tribe Executive committee)

- Like any government, the Nez Perce Tribe provides a variety of important services to tribal membership as well as the community at large, the tribe has a healthcare clinic, tribal police force, a social service department, and comprehensive Natural Resource Program.
- Operate one of the largest fisheries departments of any tribe in the nation, working on recovery of listed species under the Endangered Species Act.
  - Tribe recommends the BIA Public Safety and Justice account be increased by 75.5 million over what has been enacted; regarding the Indian Health Service, the tribe supports the \$13 billion provided for the IHS and FY 26 which includes 5.3 billion advanced appropriations.
  - The tribe operates Nimiipuu health so recommend maintaining FY 26 funding levels going forward for FY 27 but it must be noted that funding should be continually adjusted to keep pace with medical and non-medical inflation, with population growth.

- The Tribe operates CDFIs - the tribe recommends \$35 million for the BIA Office of Indian and economic development, for jobs training and technical assistance, support for the Indian business incubator grants and support for the native Act grant, and \$25 million for the Indian loan guarantee program to expand the program to incentivize banks to finance projects in Indian country.

Donna Thompson, Chairwoman (Fort Hall Business Council – Shoshone-Bannock Tribes)

- Larger issue remains regarding the annual discretionary appropriations for healthcare, which is less than 50% of the level of need. This leads to Indian health systems to heavily rely on Medicaid for the shortfall.
  1. Issue because Medicaid is run by States with whom Tribes do not have a trust responsibility relations; difficult when Congress and the State of Idaho limits Medicaid spending. Funding for IHS should be made fully mandatory.
  2. CMS should work directly with Tribes, not States.
  3. Retention of healthcare providers is vital given impacts of loss of even one doctor, dentist, or nurse. Request for the subcommittee to conduct oversight, ensuring IHS is focused on improving healthcare services in Indian Country.
  4. Need more people in BIA to be working on a five-year backlog in probate cases and leasing issues. Oversight is also needed on how BIA can approve these services.

Chief J. Allan, Chairman (Coeur D'Alene Tribe)

- Executive Order Tribe, not Treaty Tribe.
- Indian Country has historically been underfunded.
- Healthcare is what helped through difficult times.

Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK)

- Encouraged Tribes to run IHS services/programs on their own as they'll run it better than the federal government.

Dr. Toni Tsatoke-Mule, Executive Director (Kiowa Education Agency)

- Speaking at the request of Chairman David Patty Sullivan and on behalf of the Kiowa Executive Branch.
- Today's hearing provides a way for tribal nations, no matter how large or small, to exercise tribal sovereignty, reaffirm the federal trust responsibility and honor the firm foundation of treaty law, a supreme law of the land.
- The only path for tribal self-determination is education.
- The infrastructure needed to grow the capacity of each tribal education department or agency also called a TED or a tea is crucial in our educational journey.

Kristina Andrew, Third Chief (Curyung Tribal Council from Dillingham AK)

- Asking for an exemption for Tribe from the Alaska moratorium, which bars Indian Health Services from contracting directly for the delivery of services with all tribes in Alaska that were not already contracting prior to 2006 the non-contracting tribes are instead served by regional intertribal healthcare entities.
- Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBHC) has now created an organizational structure that freezes out Curyung from any decisions related to the delivery of healthcare in our community.
- Impending withdrawal from BBHC means HIS will need to find a way to deliver healthcare to Curyung.
- We should have the right to contract for this healthcare like any other Tribe in the lower 48.
- Like tribes in the lower 48 we ask that you support an additional exemption to the current moratorium, so that our tribe has the maximum options available to design healthcare systems that provide the best quality care right now.

Vivian Korthuis, Chief Executive Officer (Association of Village Council Presidents – Bethel AK)

- Increase the funding for Tauahi So that demonstration sites have parity with the original pilot sites.
- Provide resource for continued innovation under the Tauahi model.
- Preserve Tauahi and make it make it permanent.

Duane Clarke, Chairman (The Hualapai Tribe of Arizona)

- Waller Wallapai Tribe Water Rights Settlement Act secured 4,000 acre feet of the Colorado River and authorized \$312 million to build the pipeline to deliver the water to the reservation, even though Congress has not yet appropriated the funding promised in the Settlement Act.
- Received zero funding back in Fiscal Year 26 because Congress has not yet appropriated any funding. Only two fiscal years now, 27 and 28 to appropriate all \$312 million, with the full amount to be deposited by April 15, 2029, or the entitled entire settlement becomes void. To date, only \$79,000 has been deposited.
- We're asking that the full \$312 million this year, because we cannot know what the process.

Derrick Leslie, Director of Tribal Education Department (White Mountain Apache Tribe)

- VR Program for Tribal members with disabilities require stable, predictable federal funding.
- Urge Congress to maintain continuity of funding and to preserve Rehabilitation Act principles while respecting tribal sovereignty and federal trust and treaty obligations during and after changes in administration of funds.

Duane Jackson, Jr., Council Representative (Gila River Indian Community)

- Concern about federal rights of way – inability of full implementation of the settlement is the obligation to survey all the federal rights of way on the reservation. Legislation contemplated a six year period for completion of the rights of way – but now already in year 8 and only received \$1 million of the \$5.7 billion needed for the work.
- Here to request the remaining \$4.7 million to complete the project in 2027.
- Also need legislative language to support the sixth grade at the Casablanca Community School.