

**Senate Appropriations Committee**  
**Budget Hearing- United States Forest Service (USFS)**  
**April 30, 2026**

**Witness:** Chief Tom Schultz, USFS

**Highlights:**

This hearing analyzed the FY27 Forest Service budget, showing cuts to state and Tribal forestry assistance, research, and collaborative programs that could undermine Tribal co-management, treaty-based coordination, and cross boundary forest management tools such as those enabled by Good Neighbor Authority. While Forest Service leadership affirmed commitments to Tribal consultation, co-management, and partnership-based stewardship, Senators questioned whether those commitments can be sustained without dedicated funding and staffing to support meaningful Tribal and state participation.

**Key points:**

- **Tribal partnerships framed as essential to forest and wildfire management.**
  - Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz repeatedly emphasized that effective forest management, wildfire mitigation, and watershed protection depend on partnerships that cross jurisdictional boundaries, explicitly including Tribal governments alongside states, local governments, and private landowners. He described Tribes as bringing “local knowledge, experience, and accountability” that improves outcomes, particularly in wildfire prevention and landscape-scale management strategies
- **Concerns raised about budget cuts to Tribal forestry grants and partnerships.**
  - Ranking Member Merkley and several Senators voiced concern that the FY27 budget eliminates or reduces state and Tribal forestry assistance grants, collaborative restoration funding, and programs that support Tribal participation in forest stewardship and wildfire response.
  - Senators warned these reductions would undermine co-management models that have proven effective at reducing litigation risk and increasing fuel reduction, prescribed fire, and restoration work.
- **Great Lakes Tribal treaty rights and co-management issues.**
  - Senator Baldwin raised specific concerns about the proposed closure or relocation of Forest Service Region 9 offices and the potential impact on coordination with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC) and its 11 member Tribes. She stressed that these relationships are not discretionary but stem from treaty-reserved rights.
    - Chief Schultz responded that the Forest Service would uphold all Tribal commitments and stated that relocating offices would not diminish treaty obligations or daily coordination, though he acknowledged that the regional structure would change under the reorganization.
- **Alaska Tribes and co-management highlighted as a positive model.**
  - Chair Murkowski highlighted co-management arrangements in Alaska, particularly at Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center in the Tongass National Forest. She noted that Tlingit and Haida Tribal partners had stepped in to provide visitor

services and cultural interpretation, improving operations during staffing challenges.

- Chief Schultz cited this partnership as a model for how Tribes can play a central role in public land management while sharing cultural context with visitors.
- **Commitment to Tribal consultation in Tongass forest planning.**
  - Multiple references were made to the ongoing revision of the Tongass National Forest Plan.
    - Chief Schultz committed on the record to a robust public process that includes consultation with Tribal governments and consideration of subsistence needs, fisheries habitat, and cultural values alongside timber and recreation planning.
- **Alaska Native Vietnam veteran allotments.**
  - Chair Murkowski raised the unresolved issue of Alaska Native Vietnam veterans who were unable to select ANCSA allotments due to military service. She asked for Forest Service cooperation in identifying National Forest System lands, including in the Tongass, that might support equity solutions. Chief Schultz committed to working with her office on this issue.
- **Budget cuts seen as conflicting with collaborative land management tools.**
  - Although Good Neighbor Authority was not always named explicitly, Senators repeatedly referred to **state–federal–Tribal collaborative forest management frameworks**, including shared stewardship, cross-boundary treatments, and cooperative restoration projects—many of which operate through GNA or similar authorities. Members warned that eliminating state, private, and Tribal forestry funding would weaken these partnerships just as wildfire risk and drought conditions intensify.
- **Shift toward non-federal cost responsibility raised concern.**
  - Chief Schultz explained that the FY27 budget reflects an intentional shift away from exclusive federal funding toward greater reliance on states, Tribes, permittees, and local partners to carry out certain management activities.
  - Senators cautioned that without federal investment, many state and Tribal partners—particularly in rural areas—may lack the capacity to maintain fuel reduction, forest health, and wildfire readiness efforts historically supported under authorities like GNA.
- **Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP) defended as a success.**
  - While distinct from GNA, CFLRP was repeatedly cited as an effective collaborative tool bringing together states, Tribes, environmental groups, and industry.
  - Senators emphasized that these collaborative approaches reduce litigation and support both forest health and rural economies—outcomes similar to those sought under Good Neighbor Authority—and warned that cutting such programs risks reversing progress.
- **Assurances on continued collaboration despite restructuring.**

In response to repeated questions, Chief Schultz stated that the Forest Service intends to

preserve partnerships and collaborative approaches even as it consolidates offices, reduces facilities, and reorganizes regional structures.

- He emphasized a move toward state-based leadership models meant to improve coordination with state and Tribal governments, though Senators remained skeptical that these changes could offset lost funding and staff capacity.