

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES

Presented by: Ervin Carlson, President

Inter Tribal Buffalo Council

Fiscal Year 2014

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I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

My name is Ervin Carlson; I am a member of the Blackfeet Nation in Montana and the President of the Inter Tribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), formerly the Inter Tribal Bison Cooperative. Please accept my sincere appreciation for this opportunity to submit written testimony to the honorable members of the House Committee on Appropriations; Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. ITBC is a federally chartered Indian Organization under Section 17 of the IRA and is headquartered in Rapid City, South Dakota. ITBC is comprised of fifty-eight (58) federally recognized Indian Tribes in nineteen (19) states. On behalf of the member Tribes of ITBC I would like to address the following issues: 1) request an appropriation of \$3,000,000.00 for Fiscal Year 2014, from the Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Operation of Indian Programs, to continue our restoration effort, to continue to provide highly qualified technical assistance, implement our marketing initiative and to continue our health initiative which utilizes buffalo to treat and prevent diet related diseases among Native Americans; 2) explain to the Committee the unmet needs of the members of ITBC; and 3) update the Committee on the present initiatives of ITBC.

The American buffalo, also known as bison, has always held great meaning for American Indian people. The buffalo provided the Tribes with food, shelter, clothing and essential tools. In the 1800's, the white-man recognized the reliance Indian Tribes had on the buffalo. Thus began the systematic destruction of the buffalo to try to subjugate the Tribal nations. The slaughter of over 60 million buffalo left only a few hundred buffalo remaining. Indian people have a strong spiritual and cultural relationship with the buffalo that has not diminished with the passage of time. To Indian people, buffalo represent their spirit and remind them of how their lives were once lived, free and in harmony with nature. It is this connection that caused multiple Tribes to come together to organize ITBC with the mission of preserving the sacred relationship between Indian people and the buffalo through restoring buffalo to Tribal lands. ITBC envisioned the restoration of buffalo on Tribal lands would foster sustainable economic development that would be compatible with each of the Tribal cultures. The land bases of most Tribal Reservations is unsuitable for farming or raising livestock but this marginal land is ideal for raising buffalo who have lived in this ecosystem for thousands of years.

ITBC was started in 1991 and first received federal funds in 1992. Federal appropriations have allowed ITBC to successfully restore 15,000 + buffalo to over fifty Reservations on over 1,000,000 acres of trust land. With healthy, viable buffalo herds, opportunities now exist for Tribes to utilize buffalo for prevention and treatment of the diet related diseases that gravely impact Native American populations such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and others. Viable buffalo herds also offer Tribes the opportunity to develop sustainable economic development projects surrounding the buffalo.

## II. FUNDING REQUEST

The Inter Tribal Buffalo Council respectfully requests an appropriation for FY 2014 in the amount of \$3,000,000.00. This amount would greatly enhance our ability to successfully accomplish Tribal goals and objectives. This request will help balance our continuing growth in membership with our funding level. The \$3,000,000.00 funding level would restore vital funding that was cut in FY 2007 and has not been restored. Our requested funding level of \$3,000,000.00 will allow our Member Tribes to continue their successful restoration efforts, to restore our marketing initiative and to restore the health initiative for the prevention and treatment of diet related diseases among Native American populations, while simultaneously building economic sustainability for the Tribal projects.

## III. FUNDING SHORTFALL & UNMET NEED

In FY 2006, ITBC was funded through appropriations at \$4,150,000.00. The Presidents budget in FY 2007 and FY 2008 eliminated funding for ITBC. A Congressional earmark appropriation restored \$1,000,000.00 in FY 2007. In FY 2008, ITBC received \$1,000,000 from the BIA for Herd Development Grants to Tribes. In FY 2009 ITBC received \$1,000,000.00 through a Congressional earmark appropriation in the DOI, BIA budget and \$421,000.00 for ITBC Administration from BIA FY2008 carryover funds. In FY 2010, FY 2011 and FY 2012 ITBC was in the BIA budget at the level of \$1.4 million. The Presidents FY 2013 budget had \$1.406 requested but due to the continuing resolution and sequestration we still have no idea what our funding will be. FY 2014 is also an unclear picture budget wise for our organization.

Reductions in funding critically impacted ITBC's successful Marketing Program and Health Initiative to address diet related health problems epidemic on most Reservations in a manner that would provide economic stability to the Tribal programs.

ITBC is structured as a member cooperative and 100% of the appropriated funds are expended on the development and support of Tribal buffalo herds and buffalo product business ventures. ITBC funding is distributed to ITBC member Tribes via a Herd Development Grant program developed by the Membership.

ITBC surveys member Tribes annually to determine unmet project needs and currently the total unmet needs for ITBC member Tribe's projects is \$13,000,000.00. The Tribal Bison Project Proposal summaries that detail the ITBC Member Tribes projects and financial needs are on file with ITBC and available for your review.

## IV. ITBC GOALS

The goal of ITBC is to assist Tribes in the restoration of bison to Tribal lands and to promote the conservation and enhancement of Tribal bison herds utilizing traditional practices and relationships with bison. ITBC also strives to preserve bison stewardship and kinship practices that are compatible with Tribal beliefs and customs. Tribes will determine the level of sustainability they would like their individual programs to achieve and ITBC will assist them in this effort through marketing and business management

technical assistance. Tribes have also identified the health problems of Indian Country as a priority they would like to address through increasing the amount of bison meat in the daily diets of Tribal members. We do this by the following actions:

- A. Provide direct services to the Tribes to assist with restoration, conservation and enhancement of Tribal bison herds;
  - 1. Technical Assistance:

ITBC provides technical assistance to member Tribes in the areas of wildlife management, ecological management, the health role of buffalo, the cultural role of buffalo and economic development. Included as technical assistance are assessments of current and potential Tribal bison programs, services such as fencing, corral, and facility design, equipment research, range management, herd health, annual training sessions (national and regional) and community awareness.
  - 2. Surplus Bison Program:

ITBC employees work with the National Park Service, Member Tribes and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to obtain surplus bison for redistribution to Tribal Bison Projects. Tribes are able to receive bison for their programs at no cost.
  
- B. To promote and foster working relations with all levels of government, governmental agencies and wildlife oriented organizations to protect and preserve the future of bison and their habitat, through education and awareness programs; and
  - 1. Education and Outreach:

ITBC staff provides educational presentations and resources on bison status, restoration, and conservation efforts, as well as the history and culture of bison to the Native American population. Staff collaborates with entities on a federal, state, private and public level to promote bison restoration efforts. The staff also disseminates educational, preservation, grant, program, and other information to the 58 member Tribes in 19 states.
  - 2. Partnership and Collaboration:

ITBC will work with governmental and non governmental organizations on bison related activities related to the preservation and restoration of bison. ITBC is also a member of various working groups and partnerships that deal with bison issues. ITBC is also a full partner on the Inter Agency Bison Management partnership that deals with the Yellowstone National Park bison/brucellosis issue.
  
- C. To support Tribal economic efforts that utilizes the bison as an economic resource; and
  - 1. Cooperative Marketing Program:

ITBC works to develop markets for bison meat and products that will utilize bison from Tribes interested in participating in the program. ITBC will procure bison from Tribes and sell under the ITBC label. ITBC currently markets bison meat from the Tribes to the National Museum of the Native American in Washington DC and is looking to expand to more customers. ITBC will also work to support the efforts of USDA to offer Tribal buffalo meat in the FDPIR Program.
  
- D. To implement a health care initiative that will educate Native American families on the benefits of Indian produced buffalo meat in their daily diet

1. Outreach and Education:

ITBC staff will provide educational programs and materials to Tribes, regarding the benefits of incorporating buffalo meat into their regular diets.

2. Health Care Initiative:

ITBC will focus the Health Initiative promoting a project that will serve as a model for ITBC member Tribes. ITBC has implemented a project with the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe to incorporate buffalo meat into the food systems on the Reservation. ITBC is using this project as a model for the other members and will be spending the next three years working with eight Tribes that want to duplicate the FSST model. ITBC will purchase buffalo from ITBC member Tribes and other Native American producers for this program. ITBC will have the buffalo processed and distributed to participating entities.

## V. CONCLUSION

ITBC has been in existence for 20 years assisting its member Tribes to restore buffalo to their native lands for cultural purposes and working towards economic development for herd sustainability. ITBC will continue to provide technical assistance and funding to its member Tribes to facilitate the development of sustainable buffalo herds.

ITBC and its member Tribes have created a new Reservation industry, Tribal buffalo production, resulting in new money for Reservation economies. In addition, ITBC continues to support methods to market buffalo meat by providing easy access to meat on the Reservations and education efforts about the health benefits buffalo meat can bring to the Native diet. The ultimate goal is to restore the Tribal herds to a size large enough to support the local health needs of the Tribal members and also generate revenue through a cooperative marketing effort to achieve economic self sufficiency.

ITBC and its member Tribes are appreciative of past and current support from the Congress and the Administration. I urge the Committee to consider restoring ITBC funding close to the FY 2006 level of \$3,000,000.00.

I would like to thank this Committee for the opportunity to present testimony and the members of ITBC invite the honorable members of the Committee to visit our Tribal buffalo projects and experience first hand their successes.

Questions and/or comments regarding any of the issues presented within this testimony may be directed to Mr. Ervin Carlson, President, or to Mr. James Stone, Executive Director, at (605) 394-9730.