



Cowlitz Indian Tribe

Testimony Presented to

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
HEARING ON FUNDING FOR AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE PROGRAMS

The Hon. William Iyall, Chairman

March 17, 2016

SUMMARY OF COWLITZ FUNDING PRIORITIES

1. ***Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) “Aid to Tribal Government” Program:*** Increase program funding from the \$27.118 million proposed in the President’s FY17 budget to \$35 million.
2. ***U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency’s (USFWS) “Tribal Wildlife Grant Program”:*** Increase of the proposed FY17 budget from \$6 million to \$10 million.

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, my name is William Iyall, and I am the elected Chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. On behalf our nearly 4,000 tribal members, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of funding for federal programs of particular importance to our Tribe. The work of this Subcommittee is critical to our ability to continue to address the needs of our membership. Also, I respectfully acknowledge today Committee Member Rep. Herrera-Beutler, who represents the congressional district in which our Cowlitz Reservation is located.

Today I would like to highlight two federal programs of crucial importance to our Tribe, and we ask that this Committee advocate for full or increased funding for each of these programs.

BACKGROUND

As you may remember from testimony we provided in previous years, the Cowlitz Indian Tribe became landless in 1863 when, pursuant to an Executive Order, the federal government took all of our aboriginal lands at the time with no compensation. Although we were for so long landless, we have always maintained our tribal identity and our center of gravity has always been

anchored by our ties to the land. It is with great pride that I am able to report to you that last year the Secretary of the Interior finally acquired land in trust for the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and proclaimed it to be our reservation. We are landless no more.

I want to beg your indulgence for a minute to underscore what this has meant to us.

For the first time in more than 150 years, the Cowlitz people finally have a reservation over which we can exercise our right to self-government and self-determination. Only now do we have a reservation on which we can build government offices, cultural preservation facilities, elder housing and economic development projects. And because we have a reservation, we are now eligible to participate in federal programs that are tied to reservation lands, which until last year were entirely unavailable to us. Finally, we now have access to tribal court development grants, emergency management grants for police and fire protection, educational grants such as Johnson O'Malley funding, employment assistance funding support, and the USDA Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations.

On behalf of every member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, I want to thank the United States for having righted a grievous historical wrong. And I want to thank the Committee for holding these hearings to allow tribes to participate in the federal appropriations process.

Finally, I want to thank the City of La Center, our neighbors, and the Mohegan Tribe of Connecticut, both of which are our partners in creating new development opportunities that will benefit our communities for generations to come. The Cowlitz Tribe currently is engaged in an economic development project that will make it one of the largest employers in southwestern Washington State, and that economic development project will allow us to diversify in many sectors with numerous employment opportunities. We believe each direct permanent job we plan to create will likely provide two indirect jobs, which creates a positive impact well beyond the footprint of our Tribe. We are creating these jobs in a county that routinely suffers from unemployment rates higher than in the rest of Washington State and higher still than the National average.

The Cowlitz Tribe's ancestors were the original stewards of the broad area of lands that lie within southwestern Washington and northwestern Oregon, and no one is more committed or better equipped to ensure the protection of the land and natural resources for future generations. The Tribe is working closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Highway Administration, the Washington Department of Transportation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Army Corps of Engineers, and other federal, state and local agencies to ensure that the Tribe's economic development projects and related infrastructure improvements meet or exceed all applicable environmental requirements. We are committed to protecting our groundwater and surface water, our wetlands, our air, and our wildlife habitat. These natural resources are part of our culture.

Although there are numerous federal programs that we depend upon to bring much needed services to our members, we have narrowed our focus to two programs. It is our hope that Congress and the Administration will uphold their positive working relationships with us in order to continue the much needed support that our people so deserve.

EXPLANATION OF FEDERAL FUNDING PRIORITIES FOR FY 2017

1. Bureau of Indian Affairs “Aid to Tribal Government” Funding Increase.

The primary backbone of support for our Tribe’s general operations is funded through BIA’s “Aid to Tribal Government” program. It is an essential source of funds that supports the general operations of our Administration, Natural & Cultural Resources Department, and its funding helps us provide many other services critical to our membership and governance. With this core funding, we have been able to provide essential government services, employment opportunities, regional partnerships, grant programs, and increased security for our membership and employees. As a Tribe that continues to struggle to develop our own economic base, this funding source remains critical to our governmental operations and our ability to provide basic governmental functions. In sum, funding for tribal administration of programs is a key element towards our ability to support tribal self-governance.

We are grateful that the Administration has proposed a slight increase in this funding for FY 2017. We strongly urge the Appropriations Committee to allocate additional funds to the Aid to Tribal Government program so that economically disadvantaged tribes like ours will continue to be able to support critical services and programs for our members.

2. US Fish and Wildlife Service “Tribal Wildlife Grant Program” Funding Increase.

Our Tribe has been fortunate to receive two Tribal Wildlife Grants (TWG) administered by USFWS. These grants allow us to engage in positive partnerships with State and Federal wildlife managers in a joint effort to recover the endangered Columbian White-tailed Deer of the Lower Columbia River region. (This species was one of the first to be listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the 1970s.) Since we received our TWG, our involvement has heightened awareness of the issue of recovery of this long-standing concern. We brought fresh new skills and thoughtfulness as to what was needed to create a path to recovery and eventual de-listing under ESA. We are proud to be one of the primary participants leading these deer towards recovery.

Recently, USFWS has released an announcement proposing to down-list the endangered Columbian White-tailed deer to threatened status. This species is in close proximity to ESA listed salmon and steelhead of the Columbia River. Down-listing this species will provide opportunities for more work to be done in connection to habitat improvements for salmon and steelhead. We believe that collaborative partnerships with Tribal, Federal, and State resource managers are the key to achieve success towards species recovery efforts.

We are pleased that the Administration has finally recognized the importance of partnerships that this program provides. While there has not been any increase to this grant fund for several years, we are pleased that the President's FY 2017 Budget Request calls for nearly \$2 million in additional funding for Tribal Wildlife Grants. However, the requests for funding under this program far outweigh the amount of funds provided. The TWG program provides tribes capacity and opportunity to contribute to efforts that are deeply tied to traditional and cultural life-ways.

We respectfully urge Congress to provide additional funds to this program from the proposed \$6 million to \$10 million.

CONCLUSION

The Cowlitz Tribe would like to re-iterate our thanks and appreciation for the opportunity to testify on the development of appropriations under this Subcommittee's jurisdiction. We look forward to working with members of Congress to continue to build upon our successes and address future needs. We urge Congress to uphold its solemn promises to tribes, even as policymakers seek to reduce the deficit through spending reductions and revenue generation. The federal government's obligations to Indian tribes are based on numerous long-standing agreements made between tribes and the United States.

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe is happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have about the testimony we have provided here or about the programs we implement. Thank you again for your time today.