

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 2017

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**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

My name is Ervin Carlson and I am a member of the Blackfeet Nation in Montana and serve as the President of the Inter Tribal Buffalo Council (ITBC). 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 was granted a federal charter in 2009 pursuant to Section 17 of the Indian Reorganization Act and is comprised of sixty (60) federally recognized Indian Tribes in nineteen (19) states with headquarter offices in Rapid City, South Dakota. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Ruby Tribe of Alaska are the two newest members of ITBC.

American Indians have a long-standing connection with the buffalo. Historically, buffalo provided the Tribes with food, shelter, clothing and essential tools for survival. Indians have maintained a strong spiritual and cultural connection with the buffalo that has not diminished with the passage of time. ITBC Member Tribes strive to restore buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural, health and economic benefits for Tribal populations.

On behalf of the Member Tribes of ITBC, I am requesting an increase of \$5,600,000 to our current \$1,400,000 FY2015 funding level for a total funding award for FY2016 of \$7,000,000 to allow the organization to: 1) increase funds for the Tribal herd development grant program, 2) to fund ITBC efforts to serve as a meaningful management partner to the National Park Service, and 3) to fund scientific research on the benefits of buffalo meat for Native populations for the prevention and treatment of diet related diseases. ITBC requests funding from the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs Fish and Wildlife Program and also from the National Park Service.

**FUNDING HISTORY**

ITBC has been funded through various methods including the President's budget, Congressional earmarks or administrative action since 1992. ITBC's approximate annual funding is listed below:

FY 1992 - 1993	\$ 400,000.00 Congressional Earmark
FY 1994 - 1999	\$ 650,000.00 President's Budget
FY 2000 - 2001	\$1,100,000.00 President's Budget; Congressional Earmark
FY 2002 - 2003	\$1,560,000.00 President's Budget; Congressional Earmark
FY 2004 - 2005	\$2,200,000.00 President's Budget; Congressional Earmark
FY 2006	\$4,100,000.00 President's Budget; Congressional Earmark
FY 2007	\$1,000,000.00 Administrative Action BIA
FY 2008	\$1,000,000.00 Congressional Earmark

FY 2009 - 2010	\$1,400,000.00 Congressional Earmark; Administrative Action BIA
FY 2011	\$1,750,000.00 President's Budget; Administrative Action BIA
FY 2012	\$1,400,000.00 President's Budget
FY 2013	\$1,600,000.00 President's Budget; Administrative Action BIA
FY 2014	\$1,400,000.00 President's Budget; Administrative Action BIA
FY 2015	\$1,450,000.00 President's Budget; Administrative Action BIA
FY 2016	\$1,400,000.00 President's Budget

The above funding history illustrates Congressional and Administrative support for ITBC and Tribal buffalo herds. Annual funding of ITBC provides evidence that buffalo restoration and management is not a limited or one-time "project" but a "recurring program" most recently funded from the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs Fish and Wildlife line item.

**FUNDING INCREASE JUSTIFICATION**

- Increase in Herd Development Grant Funds

ITBC expends 100% of the appropriated funds on the development and management of Tribal buffalo herds. A significant portion of ITBC funding is distributed directly to ITBC Member Tribes via a Herd Development Grant program administered by ITBC. The herd development grant program commenced in 1992 with \$400,000 to assist the twelve member Tribes in the organization. In 2002, ITBC was awarded \$1,000,000 for Tribal herd development grants to support 25 Tribal herds. Since 2002, the herd development grant funding has been stagnant at \$1,000,000 despite the growth of the organization to the current sixty (60) member Tribes and 54 buffalo herds. In total, ITBC collectively manages over 20,000 buffalo which is more than all the buffalo currently managed by NPS in the National Parks. A \$2,500,000 increase for Tribal herd development grants will provide critically needed funding to protect and manage existing Tribal herds. This increase will provide a total of \$3,500,000 for distribution to Tribes in an average amount of \$65,000 per Tribal herd depending on specific needs. These funds will create jobs in Indian Country, create sustainable Tribal buffalo herds and allow Tribes to utilize buffalo for economic development.

- Funding for National Park Service and United States Fish and Wildlife Service Partnership

Since its inception, ITBC has partnered with the National Park Service (NPS) on buffalo management efforts including population management through roundups and distribution of buffalo to Tribes from the parks national refuges. ITBC has not been funded for these activities but has utilized minimal administrative funding to partner with the federal agencies. For example, ITBC has agreed to manage buffalo removed from Yellowstone Park for population control, transport the animals to processing facilities and distribute processed meat to Tribes despite very limited funding for these efforts. Additionally, ITBC is a member of the Interagency Bison Management Plan workgroup and has incurred significant costs to participate in all related activities to insure that Tribes are represented in buffalo management decisions. ITBC can continue these efforts and

develop and manage a quarantine program that will allow the transfer of live buffalo from the Yellowstone Park to Tribes through an increase of \$500,000 in annual funding.

- Health Related Research

ITBC has a long-term objective to prevent and treat diet related diseases in Native populations through the reintroduction of buffalo into daily diets. However, these efforts to coordinate with health care providers have been limited by the lack of scientific evidence of the health benefits of natural grass fed buffalo diets. ITBC believes research to develop concrete evidence of these health benefits will facilitate ITBC partnerships with health programs to prevent and treat diet related diseases in Native populations.

Additionally, sound research results will allow ITBC to develop a health education curriculum for healthy living with a component specifically focused on Native youth. Further, this critical research will support ITBC's efforts to provide buffalo meat to school lunch programs as a healthy alternative to other meat products.

Funding in the amount of \$3,000,000 will allow ITBC to pursue professional research objectives.

### **CURRENT ITBC INITIATIVES**

ITBC's primary objectives are to restore buffalo to Tribal lands, and to conserve and manage existing Tribal herds through the promotion of traditional buffalo handling practices and beliefs. ITBC strives to offer assistance and opportunities to Tribes to meet the needs and desires of individual Tribal programs. ITBC attempts to balance the varying interests of member Tribes from maintaining herds for spiritual purposes to utilizing buffalo as viable economic development endeavors. ITBC accomplishes these objectives as follows:

1. Technical Assistance to Tribes:

ITBC assesses current and potential Tribal buffalo programs to determine technical service needs and infrastructure needs and provides technical assistance in the areas of wildlife management, ecological management, range management, buffalo health, cultural practices and economic development. Further ITBC assists with fencing, corrals, facility design, water development and equipment research. ITBC provides annual training sessions (national and regional) designed to enhance Tribal buffalo management.

2. Education and Outreach:

ITBC staff provides educational presentations to various audiences including school-age youth on buffalo restoration, conservation efforts, and the historical, cultural relationship between buffalo and American Indians.

### 3. Partnership and Collaboration:

ITBC is a member of various Federal and State working groups organized to address buffalo issues. ITBC collaborates with the National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service on surplus federal buffalo and to address the Yellowstone brucellosis concerns. However, ITBC participates on a limited basis due to a lack of funding for these collaborative efforts.

### 4. ITBC Marketing Program:

ITBC strives to develop markets for buffalo meat and products for interested member Tribes at the local and national level. ITBC procures buffalo, as limited funds allow, from Tribes and sells the meat products under a joint Tribal and ITBC label. An increase in funding will enhance these marketing efforts.

### 5. School Lunch Program:

ITBC has eight Member Tribes serving Tribal raised buffalo into their school lunch programs to address health concerns of school-age children. ITBC anticipates expanding this program to 20 Tribes in the next three years with increased funding.

## **CONCLUSION**

ITBC has existed for over two decades to assist Tribes with restoration of buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural purposes. No other program exists to assist Tribes with buffalo restoration and protection.

ITBC and its member Tribes have created a new Indian Reservation industry that includes job creation and new revenue for the Tribal economies. ITBC ultimately hopes to restore Tribal herds large enough to support local Tribal health needs and generate sufficient revenue to achieve economically self sufficient herds.

ITBC and its member Tribes are appreciative of past and current support from the Congress and the Administration. However, I urge the Committee to increase ITBC funding to a total of \$7,000,000 which is a level commensurate with the growth of the Tribal Buffalo Programs. This increase will demonstrate Congressional respect for this national icon and allow ITBC to fulfill its responsibilities to restore, protect and manage buffalo.

I would like to thank this Committee for the opportunity to present testimony and I invite you to visit ITBC 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.