



**Testimony of Ron “Tehassi” Hill  
Oneida Business Committee Member  
Oneida Nation of Wisconsin  
May 16, 2017**

Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. It is an honor to be here on behalf of more than 17,000 members of our Community.

I want to begin by thanking Committee leadership for its commitment to Indian Country. We appreciate the significant time, preparation and resources that go into this hearing, and I just want to say that it does not go unnoticed.

Now down to business. I am here today to make three requests of this Committee.

- 1) Incorporate Self Governance into a greater number of tribal programs;
- 2) Restore funding to the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative; and
- 3) Protect the Tribal General Assistance Program (GAP)

**Self Governance**

I will begin with our most broad request. Tribal Self Governance—that is tribal control of the distribution and administration of federal funding—must be expanded.

Federal dollars are most efficiently used when micro-level decisions are made at the local, tribal government level.

At Oneida, we practice what we preach. We have assumed responsibility for our healthcare, education, and most BIA programs. This means that the tribal government, not the BIA, make decisions about how to manage our grants. And it means that when refinements need to be made, we don't have to go to Washington to ask permission—we just fix the problem.

The result has been unambiguously positive. Environmental, health and education indicators have gone up, while administrative costs have gone down. Just as important, our Tribal Government capacity has also improved. Our staff now has the knowledge, skills and experience to take on new and more complex governance operations, and they do so on a regular basis.

Congress needs to learn from our experience and expand the scope of programs that are eligible for self governance.

For instance, the Department of Health and Human Services allows Indian Health Service functions to be contracted out to tribes; but the same department prohibits tribal

governments from running TANF or Medicaid programs. Similarly, U.S.D.A., Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice and EPA programs should all allow tribes to receive direct funding rather than have their grants pass through the State.

Self Governance is good policy and it is good practice. It ensures that scarce federal dollars are used to build capacity rather than bureaucracy. And it makes good on the United States' sacred obligation to respect tribal sovereignty and allow tribal governments to manage our own affairs.

### **EPA--Great Lakes Restoration Initiative**

Oneida Nation's creation story teaches us that everything is connected, and that there must be balance for the environment to thrive. The belief that all living beings are important is instilled into the conscious of our Tribe, and we are committed to environmental conservation and stewardship. It is this ethos that led us to our partner, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Among the most important long-term projects Oneida is working on with the EPA is the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Launched in 2010, the Initiative is designed to protect and restore the largest system of fresh surface water in the world--which happens to be in our backyard.

Over the last eight fiscal years, the Oneida Nation has been awarded approximately \$4.4 million for hundreds of Great Lakes watershed improvement projects. Some examples include:

- Creating adaptive management system in the Silver Creek Watershed to meet the new federal and State phosphorus regulations.
- Removing and replacing blocked culverts and dams at Brown County Golf Course and Pamperin Park, opening up 214 miles of streams for fish passage.
- Founding a natural resources technology program that has now trained and hired seven Oneida tribal members.

In short, the accomplishments of the program have been astounding. The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has been the single most successful federal program designed to help restore our lands.

Given the enormous successes of the program at Oneida and across the Midwest, it is deeply concerning that the President proposes to virtually eliminate funding for this initiative in FY 18. This would be a catastrophic mistake. It would hurt our fishing, tourism and agriculture industries, and it would put in jeopardy hundred of millions of dollars of investments from state and local governments, as well as the private sector.

The Oneida Nation of Wisconsin strongly urges the committee to reject the proposed cuts to this program and restore it to FY 17 funding levels.

## **EPA--Tribal General Assistance Program**

Though small in budget, the EPA Tribal General Assistance Program, also known as GAP, makes a major impact for the Oneida Nation.

The program helps tribal communities build the technical capacity to manage our own environmental programs, and ensures that we have a voice in national policy decisions that affect our land, air and water.

At Oneida, this funding allows us to expand our environmental staff. We have used the funds to hire an area environmental manager, and cover part of the costs of our wetlands program manager as well. This not only protects the health of our members and improves the environment, it also supports Oneida sovereignty.

Perhaps even more important, the GAP grant helps offset the cost of interacting with the EPA and other federal agencies on environmental policy issues. As a member of the Regional Tribal Operations Committee, I witness how important this funding is first hand. At least three times a year, my colleagues on the RTOC and I meet with the EPA to help identify how policies may impact tribal governments and tribal lands in our region.

In Fiscal Year 2017, Congress appropriated \$65,476,000 for GAP. The program also received \$65,476,000 million in Fiscal Year 2016.

While it is still unclear how the President may treat the program in his Fiscal Year 2018 budget, I ask that, at a minimum, the Committee maintain this level of investment next year. Understanding the constrained fiscal environment, I believe we can make do without an adjustment for inflation; but significant cuts below the current funding levels will directly and negatively impact the environmental health of tribes across the nation.

## **Conclusion**

There are of course dozens of other programs that are vitally important to the Oneida Nation in the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations bill, however in the interest of time I will conclude my remarks here.

I want to once again thank the committee for this opportunity, and I look forward to working with you to ensure that Indian Country can continue to thrive in Fiscal Year 2018 and beyond.