

**Testimony of George Thompson, Councilman
Lac Du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians
Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee
On Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Concerning IHS, BIA AND EPA Programs in the FY 2018 Budget
May 17, 2017**

Good afternoon Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum and members of the Subcommittee. My name is George Thompson. I am a Councilmember of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, located in Vilas, Oneida and Iron Counties Wisconsin. I am joined by Joseph Wildcat, President of the Lac du Flambeau Band and Larry Wawronowicz, the Tribe's Natural Resource Director for 34 years. Our Tribe of 3,400 members is the largest employer in Vilas County. Together with tribal enterprises, the Tribe employs 800 individuals, with nearly 25% or 190 employees paid in full or in part with appropriations made under this Subcommittee's jurisdiction. Within our 86,600 acre reservation, there are 260 lakes, 71 miles of streams and rivers, approximately 42,000 acres of forested land and roughly 42,000 acres of water and wetlands. Our reservation has one of the densest concentrations of fresh water in the country and our lands and waters are sacred to the Band and its members. We are working hard to build and maintain a stable, healthy tribal community, amid many challenges. Like many rural areas, we are dealing with opioid abuse and the challenges of creating and maintaining jobs for our citizens and residents.

It has taken many years for the Tribe to reduce our unemployment rate, which spiked considerably after the 2008-2010 economic downturn. Federal expenditures by our Tribe in FY 2016 totaled about \$20 million, of which IHS, BIA and EPA funding amounted to \$12 million or about 60%. It is critical to our Tribe that Federal funds within this Subcommittee's jurisdiction increase in 2018 to help us address our great health, educational, social and natural resource needs. My testimony today addresses IHS, BIA and EPA programs that are vital to the Lac du Flambeau Band. The Tribe thanks the Subcommittee for its leadership and commitment to Indian tribes which honors the Nation's trust responsibility to the Indian people. The Tribe appreciates that Congress provided increased funds in FY 2017 for BIA, BIE and IHS programs.

As you have done for Fiscal Year 2017, I ask that you reject President Trump's "America First" Budget Blueprint for FY 2018, which calls for unwarranted reductions in non-defense agency appropriations, including a proposed \$12.6 billion cut to the Department of Health and Human Services, \$1.5 billion cut to the Department of the Interior, and \$2.6 billion cut to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The America First budget proposal, if enacted, would cause great harm to tribal communities and to Native Americans who, more than most Americans, rely heavily on federal appropriations across multiple federal agencies, not just Interior and DHHS.

The Tribal Government does not want to inform any one of the hundreds of loyal tribal employees whose jobs depend, in whole or part on federal funds, that the Tribe must lay them off in 2018 because the Federal government did not honor its commitments to Indian people in accordance with the trust responsibility and the special government-to-government relationship. Please continue to educate your colleagues concerning the trust obligation and the important

work that Indian tribes carry out with federal funds. What our Tribe has worked decades to build will be at risk if program funding drops, layoffs occur and families move off the Reservation.

We are grateful that the final spending measure for FY 2017 that Congress just passed. Native Americans, many of whom are low income wage earners, live a fragile existence. Adverse changes can tip them further into poverty and unemployment, which can lead to substance abuse and premature death. I have seen this on our Reservation. Please recognize the interconnectedness of IHS, BIA and EPA programs which help promote healthy tribal members and healthy communities; essential building blocks for stable communities where Tribal parents can raise Native youth in safety and security so that may realize their fullest potential and contribute to their community's and the Nation's future.

I. INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE PROGRAMS

The Tribe greatly appreciates the \$232 million increase Congress provided for FY 2017 for the IHS, allocated among such accounts as Hospitals and Clinics, Purchased/Referred Care (P/RC), Mental Health, Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Dental Health, Contract Support Costs (CSCs), construction and maintenance and improvement. The Tribe operates the Peter Christensen Health Center, Dental Program, a Family Resource Center, a Domestic Abuse Program, a Youth Center and Child Support Agency. Our programs ensure the support and preservation of family life and wellbeing by providing such services as outpatient mental health, outpatient alcohol and other drug abuse, and psychological consults. The Health Center provides quality health care and offers a full range of family medical services by Board Certified family physicians, advanced practice nurse practitioner and physician-assistants. The program also provides podiatry, optometry, pharmacy and a range of community-based services. Together, our health programs employ a staff of 140 individuals, about three-quarters of our workforce supported in part by funds appropriated by this Subcommittee. The Tribe asks that Congress increase IHS funding in 2018.

Our rationale for this funding increase is borne of necessity. We are seeing how important proactive and preventive health services are for our community. Wisconsin is seeing a large increase in babies born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), a result of women taking prescription drugs such as Vicodin or heroin while pregnant. Recent data shows that Vilas County has the second-highest percent of NAS babies in the State, 2-3/100 babies. Early treatment is critical. We urge the Subcommittee to increase funds for preventive health programs, which can save lives and empower our Tribe to help our citizens address addictions and mental health issues, especially targeting our tribal youth. Please prioritize increases in FY 2018 IHS funding for Hospitals and Clinics, mental health, substance abuse treatment and P/RC funds so that we can take a proactive stance by investing wisely in preventive health services.

II. BIE AND BIA APPROPRIATIONS

Indian Education. Congress provided \$34.7 million for Adult Scholarships and \$2.9 million for special higher education scholarships for FY 2017. We recommend this Subcommittee include a similar increase for FY 2018. As this Subcommittee noted last year: "Indian education remains among the Committee's top priorities because it is a fundamental trust responsibility and because elementary and secondary students in particular have fallen far behind

their peers.” We oppose cuts to the BIE and Department of Education in FY 2018 which threaten to undermine educational services for Native youth and adults. Together, these programs provide critical educational resources and services for tribal members that are crucial to meeting the unique educational and cultural needs of our students. If our children are to excel in life, they must be educated in stimulating environments by well educated professionals, transported in modern buses over all-season roads and delivered to safe, loving homes. Our Tribe is doing its part. Education at Lac du Flambeau begins early. We operate the Little Dream Daycare and Zaasijiwan Head Start and Early Head Start programs. We also operate a Home-Based program that serves up to 24 families. Our early education programs include multiple activities designed to promote learning, school readiness and social/emotional wellness. We realize that good nutrition, learning through play and time outdoors in the fresh air are central to health.

The Lac du Flambeau Public School and Lakeland Union High School educate our tribal youth. The High School’s 2015/2016 student body was 20% Native American and 86% of high school graduates went on to attend four- and two-year colleges/technical schools, 9% entered the workforce or pursued other activities and 5% entered the military. For this reason, we oppose any effort to eliminate the Johnson O’Malley Program, the goal of which is to address the unique cultural needs of Indian students attending public schools through a supplemental program of services planned, developed and approved by the Local Indian Education Committee, comprised of parents of eligible Indian students. The \$14 million JOM Program must be protected, so that Indian children are provided the supplemental programs that honor and celebrate their Native heritage and help them grow into confident, well-adjusted adults who contribute to their families.

Road Maintenance Program. The Tribe appreciates Congress including a \$3.2 million increase in funding for the Road Maintenance Program for FY 2017. We believe a \$10 million increase is justified for FY 2018. The Tribe receives less than \$90,000 to maintain nearly 180 miles of BIA-owned roads. Our budget requirements for road maintenance are closer to \$2 million annually. As the Subcommittee noted, appropriations for FY 2016 permitted only 16% of BIA-owned roads to be maintained in “fair” condition. According to the CDC, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among Native Americans aged 1-44. Native American infants are eight times more likely to be killed in a motor vehicle crash than a non-Native infant. Poorly maintained roads contribute to motor vehicle crashes. Poor roads contribute to absenteeism at work and school and delay police and EMT responders. A year’s entire road maintenance budget can be consumed in the winter months removing snow and salting/sanding roads to ensure freedom of movement. Transportation barriers undermine federal and tribal efforts to improve Native health, educate our youth and attract businesses and jobs to remote, rural communities like ours. The “historical” formula for the BIA Road Maintenance Program makes little sense to us. We ask the Subcommittee to include report language for FY 2018 that directs the BIA to explain the allocation methodology, verify each Tribe’s road inventory that generate Road Maintenance dollars, and make publicly available to tribes their relative share of funds.

III. NATURAL RESOURCES (EPA AND BIA)

The Tribe has a vibrant Natural Resources program, including a Fish Hatchery for several species of fish, Fisheries Management, Waterfowl habitat protection (Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, Conservation Law Enforcement, Wildlife), Water Resources, Historic Preservation and Land Management. Our Natural Resources Department employs fish biologists, wildlife

biologists, fish hatchery operators, hydrologists, technicians and administrators, many of whom are paid in full or in part with EPA and BIA funds and critical to our work protecting the resources that were promised to us in our Treaties. We urge the Subcommittee not to jeopardize our Natural Resources programs that are critical to protecting our culture, our health and our economy, part of Wisconsin's \$19 billion hunting, fishing, recreation and tourism industry. A 31% reduction in EPA funding and cuts to BIA Natural Resources programs would be devastating to our Program. Even with existing funding, we struggle to meet the demands we face to maintain clean air, water and lands from the many contaminants that threaten our community. The highest concentrations of mercury tainted lakes are in the State's northern most counties, including Vilas and Oneida. Minnesota and Wisconsin lead the nation with mercury-contaminated lakes. At present, there are more than 500 fish health mercury advisories in place in Wisconsin. This presents a direct threat to our culture because we cannot eat contaminated fish that are otherwise a staple of our diet.

A. Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. Thank you for funding the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative at \$300 million in FY 2017. Do not terminate this vital program. For the indigenous people of Wisconsin, the Great Lakes represent the lifeblood of our culture and the foundation of our economies. The protection and preservation of the Great Lakes is a necessity.

B. Trust-Natural Resources Management. In FY 2017, Congress appropriated \$200.9 million for the BIA's Trust-Natural Resources Management programs, a \$9.1 million increase from FY 2016. Our Tribe alone needs nearly a \$500,000 increase for our Tribal Fish Hatchery Operations and Tribal Management/Development Program for FY 2018. The Fisheries and Fish Culture Program raises all fish necessary for stocking reservation waters and we benefit from programs carried out by GLIFWC. Our fisheries program also generates Tribal revenues.

C. EPA Tribal General Assistance Program. Days ago, Congress approved \$3.527 billion for State and Tribal Assistance Grants, including \$2.461 billion for Infrastructure assistance grants and \$1.066 billion for categorical grants (maintaining Tribal air quality management grants and Tribal general assistance program (Tribal GAP) grants at \$12.8 million and \$65.4 million, respectively). The Tribal GAP program provides base environmental funding to assist Tribes in building their environmental capacity to assess environmental conditions, utilize available data and build their environmental programs to meet their local needs. This is a foundational program for Tribes to address the broad range of challenges we face regarding our natural resources. Our Natural Resources Program would suffer in the face of a 31% cut.

D. Circle of Flight: Wetlands Waterfowl Program. We urge the Subcommittee to continue to provide support for the BIA Circle of Flight Program (about \$707,000). This modest BIA program supports Tribal efforts throughout the Great Lakes Region to restore and preserve wetlands and waterfowl habitat within Tribal territories and enhances wild rice gathering, providing expanded hunting and fishing opportunities for economic development.

E. Underground Storage Tank Fund (LUST). We remain concerned that annual reductions to the Underground Storage Tank fund (LUST) permits ongoing contamination of ground waters that threaten tribal and other communities. We encourage the Subcommittee to instruct EPA to give greater consideration to tribal cleanup standards and help Indian tribes remediate unsafe conditions on reservations.