

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

Presented by: Ervin Carlson, President, InterTribal Buffalo Council

Fiscal Year 2019

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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 InterTribal 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. My testimony involves funding requests from the Department of Interior (DOI) (specifically the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)) and the Indian Health Service (IHS).

ITBC was granted a federal charter in 2009 pursuant to Section 17 of the Indian Reorganization Act and is comprised of sixty-five (65) federally recognized Indian Tribes in nineteen (19) states with fifty-five (55) buffalo herds. This year alone, ITBC added the Red Lake Nation of Minnesota, and the Sac and Fox Nation and the Tonkawa Tribe, both of Oklahoma.

American Indians have a long-standing spiritual and cultural connection with buffalo that has not diminished with the passage of time. Historically, buffalo provided the Tribes with food, shelter, clothing, and essential tools for survival. The near extinction of buffalo was analogous to the tragic history of American Indians in this country. However, today's resurgence of buffalo on Tribal lands, largely through the efforts of ITBC, signifies survival of the revered Tribal buffalo culture. ITBC Member Tribes strive to restore buffalo to Tribal lands to rekindle the cultural, traditional and spiritual relationship between buffalo and Tribes and to utilize buffalo to promote the health, and economic well-being of 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 FY2018 funding level for a total funding award for FY2019 of \$7,000,000 from Department of Interior funds 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 buffalo management partner to federal agencies, 3) to fund scientific research on the benefits of buffalo meat for the prevention and treatment of diet related diseases, and 4) to provide for a biologist position at ITBC.

FUNDING HISTORY

ITBC has been funded through various methods from the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs funding 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
FY 2017	\$1,400,000.00	President's Budget
FY 2018	\$1,400,000.00	President's Budget

The above funding history illustrates Congressional and Administrative support for ITBC's restoration and management program and the 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." ITBC has most recently been funded from the BIA, Natural Resources, Tribal Priority Projects line item.

FUNDING INCREASE JUSTIFICATION

Increase in Herd Development Grant Funds

ITBC expends 100% of the DOI/BIA 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. 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 then, the herd development grant funding has been stagnant at \$1,000,000 despite the continued growth of the Tribal membership of the organization. Today, ITBC collectively manages over 20,000 buffalo, more than all the buffalo currently managed by NPS. 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 Partnerships

Since its inception, ITBC has partnered with the NPS on buffalo management efforts including population management through roundups and distribution of buffalo to Tribes. ITBC has not been funded for these activities but has utilized minimal administrative funding to partner with the federal agencies. For example, ITBC is a member of the Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP). The IBMP manages the migration of Yellowstone buffalo coming out of the Yellowstone National Park (YNP). ITBC has agreed to translocate some of these surplus buffalo from YNP to the Fort Peck Indian

Reservation for quarantine operations. This process will allow ITBC to transport these genetically pure buffalo to other tribal trust lands around the Nation. However, ITBC has incurred significant costs to participate in all related activities to insure 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 YNP 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. ITBC wants to partner with the Indian Health Service to fund this research to promote traditional, healthy tribal diets. 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 aid 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:

Technical Assistance to Tribes

ITBC assesses current and potential Tribal buffalo programs to determine technical service and infrastructure needs, and then provides technical assistance in the areas of wildlife management, ecological management, range management, buffalo health, cultural practices, and economic development. Further ITBC assists with construction of fencing and corrals, facility design, water development, and equipment research. ITBC provides annual training sessions (national and regional) designed to enhance Tribal buffalo handling, management. However, current funding levels do not allow ITBC to be responsive to the needs of the growing ITBC Membership. Enhanced Technical Services would assist Tribes with reaching goals of self-sufficient herds.

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. However, current funding limits outreach and educational efforts. Additional funding would allow more American Indian youth to benefit from the important history of buffalo and Tribal.

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 cannot participate to its full potential and serve as a meaningful partner due to a lack of funding for these collaborative efforts.

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.

School Lunch Program

ITBC has eight Member Tribes serving Tribal raised buffalo in 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.

Staff Biologist

ITBC needs a staff biologist to: promote education and outreach; assist with partnerships and collaborations; and provide increased technical assistance to Member Tribes

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 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 the national mammal 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 firsthand 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 Ms. Arnell Abold, Executive Director, at (605) 394-9730.