



# The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation



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Prepared Statement of the Honorable Jarred-Michael Erickson, Chairman  
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

House Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

Public Witness Hearing—Native Americans

March 9, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (the “Colville Tribes” or the “CCT”), I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today.

The CCT has three recommendations for the Committee’s consideration:

- (1) Indian Health Service (IHS): The CCT would like the Committee to include language in directing the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate and report on the IHS’s management of the Purchased/Referred Care program at IHS managed facilities.
- (2) Prioritize Tribal Wildland Fire Funding Requests: Approximately half of the 1.4-million-acre Colville Reservation has burned due to wildfires during the past decade, yet tribes routinely must compete for resources within the Department of the Interior (DOI) for funding from other DOI land management agencies. Tribes, on a per acre basis, receive a fraction of what is spent on U.S. Forest Service and other federal lands for forest management and wildfire preparedness. The CCT urges the Committee to include language that would require the DOI to prioritize funding requests from tribes for preparedness and other on-reservation fire prevention purposes.
- (3) Public Safety and Justice: The Colville Tribes has a fraction of the number of officers it needs to patrol its 1.4-million-acre (2,200 square mile) reservation. The CCT urges a \$75 million increase to the applicable accounts for law enforcement officer salaries to enable tribes nationwide to hire more officers and retain the officers that they currently have.

## **BACKGROUND ON THE COLVILLE TRIBES**

Although now considered a single Indian tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation is, as the name states, a confederation of twelve smaller aboriginal tribes and bands from all across eastern Washington State. The Colville Reservation encompasses approximately 1.4 million acres and is located in north central Washington state. The CCT has nearly 9,500

enrolled members, making it one of the largest Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest. About half of our tribal members live on or near the Colville Reservation.

## **I. DIRECT GAO TO INVESTIGATE IHS'S ADMINISTRATION OF THE PRC PROGRAM AT IHS MANAGED FACILITIES**

The Colville Tribes is a “direct service” tribe, which means that IHS provides all health services, from delivery of care to billing, using federal IHS employees. For this reason, IHS has total control over the delivery of health care services on the Colville Reservation. In recent years, the Colville Tribes have endured service delivery problems related to IHS’s management of the PRC program that have directly resulted in tribal member deaths.

For an approximately three-year period that ended in October 2022, the Portland Area IHS Office administered the PRC program for the Colville Service Unit in using Portland Area Office staff, not local IHS employees located on-reservation. Many problems ensued, including the following:

- Onerous documentation requirements not required by the IHS handbook or any other IHS authority were imposed on Colville tribal members to prove they were eligible for the PRC program. This meant that tribal elders, on an annual basis, had to produce utility bills, blood quantum and other proof of tribal enrollment, and other information not required by the IHS regulations or handbook in order to get referrals for specialty care. Those who were unable to produce this information either went without care or obtained care on their own and subsequently faced collection agencies when IHS refused to pay.
- Approximately 15 months ago, a tribal elder tried repeatedly to obtain a referral for ongoing heart issues, complaining to CCT elected officials that he was unable to get calls from the IHS returned or otherwise secure a purchase order number for the referral by IHS staff responsible for processing them. The elder died of a heart attack before securing the referral. There are, unfortunately, several similar stories like this.
- Private health providers have informed the CCT that they are considering abandoning the PRC program entirely because the administrative difficulties in getting paid for services from IHS is no longer worth it.

The CCT has initiated the process to contract all IHS functions and provide these services using tribal, not IHS employees. This process, however, will take time. In the meantime, the IHS will continue to provide direct services.

IHS has been on the GAO’s high risk program list since 2017 and it would appear that many of the issues that prompted the GAO to classify IHS as high risk continue on the Colville Reservation. We request that the Committee direct the GAO to investigate IHS’s administration of the PRC program at federally managed service units and obtain input from affected tribal governments in the preparation of the report.

## **II. INCLUDE REPORT LANGUAGE DIRECTING THE SECRETARY TO PRIORITIZE TRIBAL REQUESTS FOR WILDLAND FIRE PREPAREDNESS FUNDING**

The Colville Tribes suggests that the Subcommittee include language in its FY 2024 spending bill that directs the Secretary of the Interior to prioritize tribal requests for preparedness funding from the Wildland Fire Management Account. During the past decade, more than half of the 1.4-million-acre Colville Reservation has burned in wildfire events and the CCT has been at the forefront of recommending policy changes to enable the Colville Tribes and similarly situated tribes to protect their on-reservation forests.

The Colville Tribes is a case study in why DOI must prioritize these requests. In early August of 2017, the CCT requested \$300,000 in preparedness funding to prepare for what weather reports predicted was going to be a severe lightning storm on the Colville Reservation. These funds were requested from the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. The Tribes' request would have covered the use of additional bulldozers, personnel, and equipment to prepare areas at high risk of fires from lightning ignition.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, unfortunately, denied the CCT's request. The lightning storm arrived as forecasted and, on August 7, 2017, a lightning strike ignited the Bridge Creek Fire near the town of Keller on the Colville Reservation. The Bridge Creek Fire ultimately burned 4,500 acres and was not fully contained until the following month. Suppression costs for the Bridge Creek Fire exceeded \$15 million, the bulk of which was drawn from DOI's Wildland Fire Management account. Had the Colville Tribes' initial \$300,000 request been approved, the Bridge Creek Fire would have been contained much sooner and at a significant cost savings to taxpayers.

Tribal forest managers are in the best position to assess the danger and risk to on-reservation tribal forests. Tribes rely on their forest resources for many uses and purposes, including economic development, and have a motivation to protect them from wildfires that distinguishes them from other federal land managers.

## **III. INCREASE FUNDING FOR TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER SALARIES**

There is a constant need for additional funding for tribal law enforcement and detention operations. The CCT requests that the Committee provide a \$75 million increase for the Criminal Investigations and Police Services account to enable tribes in all BIA regions to hire more police officers and retain their existing police officers.

As the Committee is aware, large land-based tribes often lack a sufficient number of tribal police officers. The Colville Tribes is no different. This often results in police response times in excess of four hours. There are occasions when the Colville Tribes has only a single officer on duty for the entire 1.4-million-acre Colville Reservation.

To make matters worse, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of young people who want to be police officers or pursue careers in law enforcement. Our law

enforcement professionals tell us that this is due to a combination of factors, including the negative political climate toward law enforcement and the inherent dangers of the job, among other reasons.

This concludes my testimony. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

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