

**TESTIMONY OF PHIL RIGDON, VICE-PRESIDENT
INTERTRIBAL TIMBER COUNCIL
PRESENTED TO THE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE FOR THE INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES ON
FY 2024 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE B.I.A., DoI WILDLAND FIRE
MANAGEMENT,
MARCH 9, 2023**

Introduction and Summary

I am Phil Rigdon, Vice-President of the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and Natural Resources Superintendent for the Yakama Nation in Washington State. The ITC is a 47-year-old association of forest owning tribes and Alaska Native organizations dedicated to improving the sustainable ecological and economic management of our 18.7 million acres of timberland and woodland held in BIA trust.

Indian forest management creates \$3 for every \$1 of investment. Indian forestry employs nearly 20,000 people. It manages wildlife habitat, aquatic resources, and forests to provide sources of food and medicine for Indian people. Management of Indian forests also generates significant revenue for tribal governments to fund essential governmental services, such as healthcare, law enforcement, and education.

80% of all the timber produced from Department of Interior lands come from Indian forests. Yet, this harvest level is only half the sustainable annual targets set by tribal governments. Imagine what tribes – big and small – would be able to do with twice the revenue and economic activity they see from current funding levels.

Every ten years, an independent team of scientists review the management of tribal forests and presents their report to Congress, as mandated by statute. The fourth Indian Forest Management Assessment Team report will be finalized and presented to Congress this Spring.

That report will show that funding for BIA forestry and wildfire preparedness continue to be far below investments in National Forest and BLM funding for comparable lands. Since 2001 that gap has been increasing due to a combination of rising federal investments in the Forest Service for forestry and wildfire and reduced or stagnant tribal funding. In spite of this trend, Tribes have been asked to take a more active role in co-stewardship of adjacent federal land.

Indian Country needs Congress to take this funding inequity seriously, and start taking steps to fix it.

Recap of FY23 appropriations

ITC appreciates the \$5.7 million increase in BIA Forestry funding in the FY23 Omnibus appropriations bill. But I would like to put this funding in context. The IFMAT IV report will

show that BIA Forestry funding, in real terms, has declined 28% over the last 30 years. During this 30-year period Indian forest trust lands have increased from 15.6 million acres to 19.3 million acres. Some tribes have expressed that they have not had a budget increase in 30 years; others have had budgets or services reduced.

Although timber prices have improved since 2009, tribal contributions to the forestry program across Indian Country have been pressured from reduced harvests from limited staff capacity and inadequate funding. Planting and thinning backlogs are evidence that forest investments have been inadequate.

Recommendations for FY 2024

BIA

In light of the findings of the upcoming IFMAT report to Congress, the ITC requests that this committee make a historic decision to fund Indian trust forests on parity with National Forest and BLM funding. This would require an *increase* in base level BIA Forestry funding by \$96 million, for a total of approximately \$162 million.

Likewise, parity with other federal forest management agencies would require an increase of \$46 million in fire preparedness funding. This will be critical to ensure tribes have adequate funding to compete with federal agencies once the new firefighter series is approved, and pay rates are increased beyond the temporary fix authorized in the BIL.

Finally, we urge Congress to work with the Administration to establish a separate Green Book line item for tribal forest roads with a target of eliminating the forest road maintenance backlog over 20 years with a budget of at least \$50 million per year.

DOI Office of Wildland Fire Management

The Bipartisan Infrastructure bill provided \$500 million in boosted pay and benefits for federal wildland firefighters. However, the law inadvertently neglected to include tribally contracted firefighters who are fighting federal fires on federal lands just like their non-tribal counterparts. Many tribes contract this function from the Department of the Interior. Yet the disparate treatment between tribal and non-tribal firefighters is making it harder to recruit and retain them in Indian Country.

Since June 2022, the ITC has requested the Interior Department resolve this inequity. Prior to today, no solution has been offered as we go into yet another fire season.

I urge this Committee to work with the Administration to identify and fund a mechanism that respects the role of tribal firefighters in the federal budget and system.