

Testimony of Chairman Steven Orihuela, Bishop Paiute Tribe  
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
February 25, 2025

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Steven Orihuela, and I am the Chairman of the Bishop Paiute Tribe in Bishop, California.

Our community is one of the many Paiute tribes across the Nation. Before the colonial period, we controlled vast stretches of land in California, Arizona, Utah, Nevada and Oregon. Our ancestors lived from the eastern slopes of the Sierras to the western slope of the Wasatch Range, from the rugged mountain in southeastern Oregon to the dry Mojave desert in southern California. Our sovereign control over much of that land was lost, but our cultural ties to the plants, animals and changes of the season remain as strong as they ever were.

Today, my 2,200 plus tribal members are still connected to the land and water of the eastern Sierras. Even though our trust land is limited to a fully developed approximately 900 acres within the city of Bishop, our elders still visit the sacred sites we lost in the Inyo and Sierra National Forests and on lands owned and managed by the Bureau of Land Management Bishop Field office.

Our relationship with the Forest Service and the BLM is cordial and cooperative, but the time has come for that relationship to evolve.

President Trump has put a priority on reducing the federal footprint. For tribes in rural parts of the country, this provides a unique opportunity for a win-win situation. Tribal governments, as independent sovereigns, are in a perfect position to receive, manage and where appropriate develop excess federal lands.

Near the Bishop Paiute Reservation, we have identified more than a dozens of parcels of land that are excess to the needs of the Department of the Interior or the U.S. Forest Service. Now is the time to move this land out of federal control and put it back in the hands of the original stewards.

Our people are good stewards of this land. We live in balance with nature. We protect the culturally significant animals on our land including *pahabichi* (bear), *tihidda* (deer), and *pigwee* (fish). And, we proactively manage the forest so that wildfires do not devastate our community. To put it bluntly, Tribal management of this land would be better for our community.

As the Committee works to determine funding levels for Fiscal Year 2026, I have one request: look to your tribal partners to reduce land management costs.

The Bishop Tribe, and I suspect many other tribes across the nation, would happily take control of marginal federal lands and put them to beneficial use. We stand ready to own that land in fee, or preferably in trust, and so I look forward to working with the new administration to facilitate these transfers.

Along with land, water is a priority for the Bishop tribe. The five Owens Valley Paiute tribes have a water settlement assessment team, and we are working diligently toward a settlement with Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP). I ask that the Committee continue to fund this important work.

I also want to thank the Committee for its support of tribal law enforcement in P.L. 280 states. I commend your decision to include a pilot program for tribes impacted by this law, but urge you to go further. All tribes deserve the ability to protect our citizens from violent crime.

With my remaining time, I want to address the funding freeze. When the United States enters into an agreement to provide appropriate funds, it is critical that the Administration lives up to that commitment. Nothing less than the American people's faith in government is at stake.

I understand that this Administration has different priorities than the last. That's no surprise. The American people elected a new president from a different party. There was an expectation that things will change.

But withholding funds that were duly awarded is punishing grant recipients for playing by the rules. That needs to stop.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the words of Secretary Burgum last week that tribal nations are not DEI. Tribes are governments, just like states and counties are governments. The Department of the Interior and the Department of Health and Human Services have clearly stated that there will be no categorical repudiation of funding for tribes. But other Departments within your jurisdiction have not. Please continue to work with the Administration on this issue.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to working with you.

Manahobü.