

**TESTIMONY OF COUNCIL MEMBER CAROLE LANKFORD OF THE
CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES OF THE FLATHEAD
RESERVATION TO THE House APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES ON
THE IHS, BIA AND EPA FY 2026 BUDGET
February 25, 2025**

My name is Carole Lankford and I am a member of the Tribal Council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (CSKT). We appreciate the Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies of the House of Representatives for its dedication to the needs of Indian Country and the opportunity to present testimony concerning these important appropriations.

For thousands of years the Bitterroot Salish, Upper Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people thrived in portions of what is now Montana, Idaho, and British Columbia. Under the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, the Flathead Reservation was reserved as our permanent homeland and encompasses over 1.2 million acres in western Montana situated around the southern half of Flathead Lake, the largest freshwater lake west of the Great Lakes. Our Tribes are made up of approximately 8,000 enrolled tribal members, with approximately 5,000 tribal members living on the Reservation. Our Reservation has a total Reservation population of roughly 30,000 people.

As a Self-Governance tribe we have for decades carried out all functions of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services on our Reservation, as well as the functions of the Environmental Protection Agency under the Treatment as States authorities for many decades. Local control and wise fiscal management have allowed us to stretch limited resources far beyond the capabilities of the federal government. As a result, our Tribal government has achieved unprecedented efficiencies by eliminating the bureaucracy and red tape inherent in the delivery of services by the federal government. However, limitations on and disruptions of federal resources present significant challenges for the delivery of services. Federal shutdowns, freezes on federal funds, and disruptions in federal employment have severe consequences for Indian tribes. At CSKT, these challenges are exacerbated by unprecedented drought, mental health, and addiction facing our communities.

INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE FUNDING

Our Reservation continues to face a serious mental health and addiction crisis worsened by the introduction of fentanyl and other opioids to our Reservation. Existing resources and methods are inadequate to effectively combat the complexities associated with opioid abuse. We provide necessary mental health care and treatment of substance use disorders. Through our engagement in several promising initiatives that, with adequate resources, will produce results for our community as substance use disorder is a treatable mental health condition that affects an individual's health and well-being. However, full funding for the Indian Health Service continues to be a critical component to adequately address this mental health and addiction crisis.

We are thankful for the forward funding of Indian Health Services, allowing for CSKT to draw down its entire budget in October 2024. This, of course, alleviated the repercussions of the

financial freeze that occurred recently. Furthermore, front funding allows us to better retain and attract all professional providers such as doctors, nurses, and ophthalmologists. Planning is critical for us to effectively deliver services, especially given the complexity of providing a range of medical, dental and public health services to our remote and dispersed communities, with distances ranging from 60 to 80 miles. Without forward funding, projects may take longer than normal to develop and implement if funding is interrupted. The forward funding model is active and proactive, garnering greater results and often life-saving treatment.

Despite the benefits of forward funding, Indian Health Service continues to frustrate the delivery of critical health services though its failure to fully reimburse tribes for contract support costs. Tribes should not have to bear the costs of carrying out federal functions without the same resources the federal government uses to administer similar services. Recently, CSKT incurred over \$500,000 in costs in connection with the delivery of services related to non-beneficiary encounters. These encounters represent the delivery of critical preventative and emergency services to ensure a healthy Tribal community and workforce, especially those members of our workforce providing medical care. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of fully funding and distributing contract support costs to tribes carrying out federal health care functions.

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS

Social Services, Public Safety and Housing. Our Tribal Council has undertaken an aggressive response to the mental health, addiction and housing crisis faced by our people. Perhaps the most significant component of our response is our participation in the Tiwahe Initiative. Tiwahe was established in 2015 to improve the health and wellbeing of families in Tribal communities by reducing poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, and associated outcomes, such as youth suicide.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's support for Tiwahe and strongly encourage additional support for Fiscal Year 2026. Additional funding is necessary to support Tiwahe Social Services, Housing, Tribal Justice Support, Tiwahe Indian Child Welfare Act programs, services, functions, and activities, including support for Tribal capacity building, and direct funding opportunities to Tribes seeking to develop and operate Healing to Wellness courts. At CSKT we have had tremendous success with our early efforts to reduce recidivism and with our drug and wellness courts. Through our participation in Tiwahe, we have developed a strategic plan set on expanding these important programs to help families stay intact through preventative measures and a focus on reunification. Individuals struggling with substance abuse need quick and easy access to critical services for life-saving measures and so that they can be successful in housing, employment, and sobriety.

Since joining Tiwahe we have made significant strides in building a well-coordinated service delivery system with a cross-disciplinary team that co-case manages children who have been removed or are at risk to being removed from their parents. Through wrapping families with a spectrum of services, we are effectively preparing families for reunification. Because nearly 90% of our child removals are based upon drug and alcohol use, braiding Social Services with treatment services and the healing court has been crucial. Furthermore, we recognize both the evidence-based research and historical importance in support of incorporating Tribal language

and cultural perspectives all programming. We, as a tribe must continue to focus on our language, history and cultural ways as it is important to know who you are as a Ksanka, Séliš, and Qlispé person. CSKT's Education Department has been effective working with all the public schools on our reservation through developing and implementing a strong cultural component at the schools but largely implemented through Federal discretionary funding. It's important to provide this funding directly to tribes and not through competition. Lastly, Tiwahe is currently focusing on hiring legal staff to begin the arduous update of our tribal codes and policies, that effectively serve as our framework for our self-governance.

We further encourage the Subcommittee to provide an additional \$2 million in Tiwahe Job Placement/Training funds and \$5 million to establish a Tribal Economic Development component within the Tiwahe Initiative to further development and deployment of multi-disciplinary socioeconomic solutions. Funding will support tribes in developing and operating comprehensive, integrated economic and community development programs.

In addition to Tiwahe funding, we support increased resources for social services, housing, Tribal Court, law enforcement and corrections. Homelessness and overcrowding continue to be at an all-time high on our Reservation, as housing prices have been driven up by an influx of people moving to the region following the pandemic and the increase in remote work options. The average home price on our Reservation far exceeds what a typical Tribal family can afford with a price tag of \$700,000. This difficult housing situation on our Reservation is further complicated by the drug and mental health crisis we face, as eligibility for tribal housing many times is impacted by addiction issues. Drug and mental health events of one individual may have wide-reaching impacts on all members of that individual's household. Addressing housing shortages for Tribal members on the Reservation and necessary infrastructure to ensure all new housing has access to the necessary water, sewer, electricity, and broadband access is critical.

Social support services are also critical to the wellbeing of families on the Reservation. We provide services that support Tribal people through job shadowing, skill development, career counseling, resume writing, and interview skills to effectively enter the workforce and advance in careers. In addition, we provide other important services such as parenting programs that help parents acquire the tools and practices of strong culturally based parenting, which in turn not only keeps many children out of the foster care system but provides strong family systems for the future.

Tribal courts are essential to a strong economy and safe communities. Our Tribal Court system provides an important venue for the resolution of conflicts on the Reservation. And our Tribal Defender's office is leading several cutting-edge efforts to reduce recidivism which include novel approaches to case management and the provision of wraparound services like supportive housing. Defenders and Prosecutors have been effectively working across departments to best address the causes underlying involvement in the justice system. These efforts need additional funding. This is particularly necessary as the CSKT Tribal Court system continues to face additional burdens and significant challenges associated with mental health and addiction.

Similarly, law enforcement and corrections are in dire need of additional funding throughout Indian country, especially as opioid and other illegal substance use increases and people self-

medicate to treat mental illness and years of trauma. Most cases handled by our law enforcement and in our jail are substance abuse related. In 2024, CSKT dispatch handled 90,088 calls with 11,059 reports filed and 200 drug cases of which 22 involved major drug dealers.

In addition, the Tribal Council is facing significant uncertainty as the State of Montana and its political subdivisions continued anticipating retrocession of felony criminal jurisdiction under Public Law 280. If the State successfully withdraws from its public safety obligations, CSKT will necessarily need to assume a dramatic increase in public safety related services. Indeed, CSKT has already seen a dramatic increase in felony drug cases in the Tribal Court. Full funding for law enforcement and corrections is imperative if we are to adequately police our communities.

Importantly, if CSKT is required to assume additional public safety obligations due to State retrocession, existing infrastructure will be wholly inadequate. Our criminal justice programs are spread out among different buildings and locations, hindering collaboration. Funding tribal justice centers with space aligned with the Tribal restorative justice values and objectives will be vital in consolidating justice-related programs, ensuring adequate detention capacity, implementing effective treatment programs to address addiction and reduce recidivism, and providing vocational and other training and educational services to help people to leave the justice system with the ability to return to their communities and find meaningful work.

Natural Resources: Wildland Fire and Aquatic Invasive Species. We thank the Committee for previous increases in federal wildland fire appropriations and appreciate continued attention to additional funding for future challenges particularly considering unprecedented drought conditions. We also encourage continued support for parity, equity, and inclusion of tribal wildland fire management programs during the Agency allocation of these funds. Current criteria limits funding to full-time, permanent wildland firefighters. However, due to our remote location and limited resources we regularly rely on part-time and seasonal employees as well as employees with other responsibilities in addition to just firefighting to fight fires when they arise.

CSKT's Division of Fire was stretched to the breaking point during with fires in 2021, 2022, and 2023 that ravaged over 80,000 acres of our homelands—consuming valuable timber and destroying over 50 structures—due in large part to inadequate infrastructure to support an evolving fire landscape. Lack of available space and facilities for permanent and emergency personnel and equipment is a problem that has grown exponentially over the past few years. With dry conditions expected this season we continue to see the critical need for a single engine air tanker base facility, personal facilities, vehicle bays for engines, and training and assessment facilities.

Our base fire preparedness budget has been flat for 25 years without adjustments for inflation or costs of living. Unfortunately, this has frustrated our ability to retain qualified staff, especially as federal regulations create vast pay disparities between federal and tribal fire personnel. As a result, we have lost over 120 employees since 2017. To address this shortage of available personnel we have been forced to rely upon administrative staff and staff from other positions and departments resulting in what we refer to as a militia fire prevention and suppression team. Our administrative and support personnel play large roles in suppression, serving as expanded

dispatch, ordering equipment and overhead for fire suppression. This work is vital to our initial attack and extended attack suppression organization. Their knowledge of federal funding and procurement process is extremely important in ensuring compliance and aiding in suppression reimbursement. However, because tribal staff remain ineligible for cost-of-living adjustments and adequate compensation for work actually performed, tribal staff are significantly underpaid. Put simply, Tribal forestry personnel join the fight to stop wildfires but are overlooked when it's time to compensate them.

We also are keenly concerned with the detection, prevention and eradication of invasive species and on the resiliency of our Tribal lands. There has been little to no coordinated effort across the Columbia River Basin for the protection against the introduction of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS), such as the zebra and quagga mussels. Because it only takes one boat to infect an entire watershed, every potential vector is a threat to the entire region. It is therefore critical to empower local parties who are best suited to guard against invasion with additional resources *and* to build strong partnerships throughout the Basin. In our view, federal monetary support and assistance in enhancing coordination are key to adequately protecting the vital water resources of the Pacific Northwest. Because of the interconnectedness of waterways, protection against AIS is an area where federal funds can match or supplement local efforts in a cost-effective manner.

Additionally, and just as importantly, because the Federal Highway system is the primary vector for transmission of invasive species, including AIS, any robust line of defense against invasive species must involve the establishment of permanent check stations on all federal highways in and out of the Columbia Basin. Working in tandem, the Transportation and Interior Departments could ensure that traffic is safely and efficiently moved into check stations, where watercraft can be inspected safely by local staff from Tribes, states, and local governments. These check stations could be constructed in conjunction with rest areas and weigh stations throughout the Basin.

CSKT operates several programs that defend against the introduction of invasive species and mitigate the invasions that have already occurred. But funding for our efforts is sparse and inconsistent. We must have adequate resources and support for coordinated efforts among the various sovereigns in the region.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

Finally, we thank the Committee for additional resources provided in recent cycles for Solid and Hazardous Waste and the Brownfields Program. However, we strenuously urge Congress to prioritize adequate funding for the Environmental Protection Agency programs for Tribal communities. These are locally administered programs that provide critical services to protect Tribal Trust Resources and protect the health of our communities. Unfortunately, however, Tribal EPA programs steadily decreased for nearly a decade and a half, placing an unreasonable drain on our government and our ability to sustain vital programs to monitor, reduce, and prevent pollution on our Reservation. The federal trust responsibility requires the United States to ensure the Tribes continue to have a livable homeland where pollution levels are safe for people,

wildlife, and the environment. Without stable funding, CSKT cannot build sustainable and effective programs to protect our environment and community.

Critical programs for protecting the Tribes' permanent homeland have seen stagnation or decreases in funding over the past decade or so. These critical programs include the Clean Water Act Section 106 Water Quality Program, the Wetland Program Development Grant program, the Clean Air Act Section 103 and Section 105 Air Quality Program, the Underground Storage Tanks and Leaking Underground Storage Tanks Program, and Tribal Federal Insecticide Fungicide Rodenticide Act ("FIFRA") Program.