

**TESTIMONY CONCERNING FISCAL YEAR 2026
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES**

**FOND DU LAC BAND OF LAKE SUPERIOR CHIPPEWA
BRUCE SAVAGE, CHAIRMAN**

February 25, 2025

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and respected members of the Committee, I am Bruce Savage, the Chairman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (Band). On behalf of the Band, I would like to thank you for inviting me to testify. We submit this testimony to urge Congress to increase, or, at the very least preserve and protect, federal funding levels for Indian programs.

As Congress knows, Indian tribes have a unique political and legal status recognized by the U.S. Constitution. Elimination or disruption of federal funding for Indian tribes has a huge impact on the ability of tribes to provide essential services to its members. Indeed, the problems that face communities nationwide are far more severe for Indian communities, with tribes having far fewer resources to address problems like substance abuse, domestic violence, public safety, and homelessness. The Band provides health, education, social services, public safety and other governmental services to our 4,200 members and more than 7,300 Indian people who live on and near our Reservation. We urge Congress to continue to fund federal programs relied on by tribes like the Band.

BIA: Trust-Natural Resources Management. There is nothing more important than preserving and protecting the territories and resources that our ancestors reserved for our people when they signed our Treaties with the United States. The Band is committed to the management, conservation, and sustainability of the natural resources of the Fond du Lac Reservation and within our Ceded Territory, where we have Treaty rights to hunt, fish and gather. We urge you to provide full funding for Trust-Natural Resources Management in FY 2026, including increased funding for Rights Protection and Implementation, which will allow us to protect, enhance, and restore natural resources within our Reservation and Ceded Territory.

Our Reservation consists of 101,153 acres, including forests, lakes and rivers that must be managed and protected for the current and future generations. Our Ceded Territory covers 30 million acres in portions of Upper Michigan, Northern Wisconsin, North Central Minnesota and all of Lake Superior within the United States. The challenges to our natural resources across the region are diverse and complex. Band members depend on our Treaty rights to put food on the table and for ceremonial practices that serve as the foundation for our culture. The stewardship of those natural resources—through scientific study, resource management, and enforcement of Band laws that regulate tribal members who hunt, fish and gather—is critical and an important source of local employment.

A great example of how the Band utilizes BIA funding can be seen with how we use BIA Forestry Program dollars to care for our lands on the Fond du Lac Reservation. Our forests provide a critical

wildlife habitat for dozens of species that are of high importance to our community culture and diet. Funding from BIA makes it possible to determine the proper intervals for timber harvest which provides employment to local loggers while at the same time providing the Band with the ability to plan the future composition of our forest by utilizing sound ecological practices for post-harvest management. In addition, BIA funding is used for wildfire suppression staffing as well as supporting our efforts to provide community safety through fuels reductions projects in housing areas.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). We appreciate Congress's continued support to provide federal funds for EPA, but we ask that funding for EPA in FY 2026 be increased due to the federal trust responsibility and the Bands inherent treaty rights.

State and Tribal Assistance Grants (STAG). We thank Congress for continuing to support funding for STAG, including increasing funding for Clean Water Act Sections 106 and 319 funding. We strongly urge Congress to increase funding for the Section 106 Program, which has not seen a substantive increase in years, yet the Band's responsibilities continue to grow and face increasing pressures and obstacles. We appreciate the increase to Section 319 program funding, which now supports one-half of a full-time position in our Water Program.

Water Quality. We have a robust federally approved water quality standards program under the Clean Water Act (CWA). Given the current threats to water resources in our region, we urge that the Tribal Section 106 funding be doubled so that we can do the work needed to protect our waters. Additionally, Congress should continue to provide funding to the EPA to support tribal training in ATTAINS, the national water quality assessment database, as well as training funding to assist tribes in conducting and reporting on water quality assessments. Finally, as tribes apply for treatment as a state to implement various CWA regulatory programs, such as 303(c) or water quality standards, 404 wetland dredge and fill permitting, 402 NPDES permitting, or 303(d) impaired waters listing and Total Maximum Daily Load implementation, there should be financial support for that capacity. This vital funding for CWA implementation could be sourced through more stable State and Tribal Multipurpose Grant awards.

Air. The Band holds Treatment as an Affected State status under the Clean Air Act § 505(a)(2) for air related activities that take place near the Reservation and/or other tribal lands. There are health impacts from air pollution both on and off Reservation from industrial, commercial and local sources. Fond du Lac maintains a long-standing air monitoring program that is consistent with federal, state, and local organizations to aid in research and pollution control endeavors. This program has faced declines in funding over the years, and we request more funding to assist with technical support and staff capacity.

Sustainability Initiatives. We request funding for planning, preparation, and adaptation to deal with impacts to our natural resources and access to treaty resources both on and off Reservation and in our Ceded Territories.

Wetlands. One-half of our Reservation is made up of wetlands. Funding for sustained wetland monitoring and protection for management and restoration of this valuable resource is needed.

Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI). The Band fully supports this initiative and thanks Congress for its continued bi-partisan support. We ask that Congress maintain the current level of funding for this initiative that has broad-reaching benefits to resources of importance for all stakeholders (state, tribal, and private) in the Great Lakes region. Funding helps support our wildlife programs, wild rice restoration efforts, fisheries stewardship and environmental staffing capacity. A good example of how this funding has a regional impact is how the Band has led an effort supported by the GLRI to restore omashkooz (elk) to the Band's Reservation and parts of the Lake Superior basin where they've been absent for over 150 years. Elk restoration will return a native species adaptable to a wide range of future climates, diversify and increase the Band's natural food sources and provide a local economic boost from elk tourism. Additionally, GLRI Tribal Capacity funding enables the Band to fully participate in Lake Superior and St. Louis River Area of Concern management, protection, and restoration activities, and has been a critical source of supplemental funding for our comprehensive Water Program.

BIA: Public Safety and Justice. A significant part of protecting our homeland is having a fully staffed and trained law enforcement department. We appreciate Congress's decision to increase funding for BIA's Public Safety and Justice, including funding to solve Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women cold cases. Our law enforcement responds to a wide range of issues and calls, with the largest issues being related to opioids and other substance abuse problems.

We address law enforcement by a combination of tribal and available federal funds and cooperative agreements with local law enforcement agencies, but more funding is needed. To meet need, we should have 23 full-time peace officers to provide 24-hour coverage on the Fond du Lac Reservation, but currently we only have 21. Those 21 peace officers include 4 Investigators (General Crimes, Sex Trafficking, Narcotics), 4 Patrol Sergeants, 10 Patrol Officers, 1 Victim Advocacy Officer, 1 School Resource Officer, and 1 K-9 Officer. We respond to over 9,000 calls per year in two counties.

Funding is also needed for training. We continue to see increases in the drug epidemic and related crimes. We strive for our officers to maintain current and effective standards when performing their duties but need increased funding for vital training, including for dealing with an increase in people with mental health issues. We have consistently seen an increase in Heroin and Fentanyl overdoses, including fatal overdoses. Many drug related incidents correlate with general crimes, burglary, theft and assaults. We have a regular need to replace equipment for both administrative and field related needs. The overall rising costs of goods and services are impacting our already strained budget and we need Congress to ensure that funding accounts for the continued increase of the costs of goods and services.

Our Reservation has seen an increase in missing persons, which results in officers needing to work increased hours resulting in overtime and a strain on our resources and equipment. We have also seen an increase in criminal sexual conduct cases involving both adults and juveniles. These cases take time and resources to investigate and complete. This adds additional strains on our limited resources. We urge Congress to recognize the growing disparities facing Indian country and increase funding for law enforcement and law enforcement related services.

Bureau of Indian Education. With funding from the BIE and the Department of Education, we

operate the Fond du Lac Ojibwe School serving an average of 220 children from pre-K through 12th grade. BIE has failed to provide any funding increases to meet our needs. More than 90% of our students come from very low-income households, and 97.3% receive free or reduced-price lunch, which is an increase from prior years. We are slowly making progress in improving the outcomes for our students. While the high school graduation rate for American Indians in Minnesota is at 51%, we are now at 99.3% which is above the statewide rate of 83.3%. BIE funding has never kept pace with need, which prevents us from providing the educational services needed for our students. We need more academic support for students; we are finding more students and families in need of support with mental health and basic needs. These needs interfere with the student's ability to make academic progress. We urge Congress to significantly increase federal funding for Indian education and ensure that the funding reaches tribes, with tribes deciding how best to use that funding.

Indian Health Service. We appreciate Congress's continued support to increase and advance funding for IHS. However, we urge Congress to provide full funding. Our members continue to face severe disparities across a broad range of health issues. We serve over 7,300 Indian people at our clinics, but the current funding level meets only 33% of our health care funding needs. At the very least, we ask that Congress ensure that all IHS appropriations are indexed to keep the pace with inflation.

We support the preservation of Medicaid, as well as the continuation of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA) and other Indian-specific provisions in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. We believe there needs to be dedicated funding to begin implementing the new authorities contained in the IHCIA, which have not yet been implemented and funded.

We support the proposal to make both Contract Support Costs and the 105(l) leasing funding mandatory every year. This is important because this funding, which is a non-discretionary funding obligation for the agency, competes with discretionary funding. We ask that Congress also provide additional funding within IHS to meet the needs of tribes to keep up with today's fast-paced digital landscape with IT developments and cybersecurity risks.

We also support permanent reauthorization of the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI) and that it be funded at \$250 million per year indexed for inflation. Tribes and tribal organizations should also be authorized to receive SDPI awards through P.L. 93-638 contracts or compacts. We ask that Congress provide funding for and full reimbursement of traditional healing treatments.

Congress has recognized the lack of infrastructure funding and support for tribes, and we urge support of an increase of \$627.5 million with recurring funding to support Public Health Infrastructure—and Congress should provide that tribes have flexibility in how they use that funding to meet their needs. Lastly, Congress should authorize Federally-Operated health facilities and IHS headquarters to use federal dollars efficiently and adjust programmatic fund flexibility across accounts at the local level, in consultation with tribes.

Miigwech. Thank you.