

Written Testimony of Jose Simon, III
Chairman, Middletown Rancheria of Pomo Indians of California
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Committee on Appropriations
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Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Jose Simon, III, Chairman of the Middletown Rancheria of Pomo Indians of California. I thank you for the invitation to testify before this Subcommittee today on behalf of my tribal government. We are a small Tribe located in Mayacamas mountain range in Lake County, CA. We operate a small casino and gas station on our reservation lands, as well as support tribal housing for the majority of our 261 tribal members. We are also one of the largest employers in the area, providing jobs for several hundred people, mostly non-Indian, so that they too can support their families and communities in our rural region of the state.

As part of the greater Middletown community, we were devastated by the Valley fire of 2015, which took away many people's homes, businesses and even lives. In response to this disaster, we offered much-needed shelter in our hotel and sustenance for those who were victimized by the fires. We also offered our resources during the pandemic, which struck just a few years later. All in all, we have risen to the occasion of providing humanitarian aid to the residents of the several communities that are part of the Middletown region, whenever catastrophe strikes. Moreover, we will continue to do so because helping those less fortunate than us is part of our culture and commitment to the greater Middletown community.

Today, we are her to request of the Subcommittee their continued commitment to us as sovereign Native American governments. Our rights as sovereigns are forged from over two centuries of Federal Indian law and policy; a myriad of statutes, regulations and Federal government commitments advanced by both political parties throughout history. As governments, we strive to improve the quality of life for our tribal citizens, as well as improve the quality of life for those communities that surround our tribal reservations. As sovereigns, we deserve the full respect of Congress, the Administration and the Courts in our government-to-government relations. We should never be subject to any action by any Administration seeking to halt or remove federally appropriated funding for our government operations. We depend on those funds to run many of our programs, services and businesses that employ large percentages of non-Indian workforces that depend on those jobs to support their families, homes and communities. To threaten such is shameful and a clear violation of the Federal government's obligations to Indian Tribes across this nation.

I wish to highlight some of the Federal appropriation needs of the Middletown Rancheria provided by the Department of the Interior and its Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Indian Health Service, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the USDA Forest Service under this Subcommittee's jurisdiction.

Department of the Interior – Bureau of Indian Affairs

We look forward to building a strong working relationship with the newly appointed “Trustee” over Indian Tribes, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum. His relations with North Dakota Tribes should serve him well in his new position.

To begin, I request that our annual Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Consolidated Tribal Government Program (CTGP) allocations for FY2026 be increased to \$500,000, a roughly 100% increase in the Tribe’s current allocation levels. The needs of our government services continually increase each and every year to keep pace with our population growth and trust land acquisitions. The majority of these funds will be used to increase staffing within the tribal government operations. For Middletown, it is difficult to secure competent staff from local area to meet our government staffing needs. The Tribe is located over 100 miles from major population centers where most of the professional talent that the Tribe seeks is located. Therefore, we need to offer compensation packages that allow the Tribe to secure these individuals in order to keep pace with our expanding government operations. In addition, we need to include additional pay incentives to entice these applicants to accept a daily commute to the Rancheria that can be extensive. Therefore, we request that the BIA’s overall CTGP funding levels be increased for FY2026. In addition, we request that contract support costs (CSC) be increased as well. An increase in tribal CSC is desperately needed to keep pace with the country’s current level of inflation.

The Housing Improvement Program (HIP) needs to be increased to help Tribes like Middletown keep pace with the increased maintenance and renovation of decades-old housing units that must be maintained for the safety of our tribal residents. We were fortunate to have not had catastrophic housing losses during the 2015 Valley fire that struck our region. However, we did experience a high volume of fix and repair work orders that we still struggle to complete. Moreover, with today’s costs of new housing construction, we are currently inhibited from meeting our current rebuild/replacement housing needs on the Rancheria. Our average HIP annual award is around \$58,000, which is not nearly enough funding to tackle our current and ever-growing housing rehabilitation list. Therefore, we must secure increased HIP funding to keep pace with housing rehabilitation needs. Our request for FY2026 HIP funding is \$174,000, a 200% increase over current levels.

Following along with Middletown’s susceptibility to wildfire disasters, we implore the Subcommittee increase funding for the Wildland Urban Interface Program (WUIP). These funds are to Tribes like Middletown in employing wildfire fuels reduction crews throughout the year to maintain our forested lands from highly flammable forest floor undergrowth beneath the forest canopy. It is also used to supplement the Tribe’s cost for an environmental technician and a GIS coordinator to help manage or forested trust lands. Our current WUIP award, including CSC is \$116,000. We request that this award increase by 100% to \$232,000 for FY2026.

In addition, Middletown Rancheria urges the Subcommittee to dramatically increase funding for overall Forest Management Programs (FMP) under the BIA’s Division of Forestry. With the addition of over 300 acres of recently converted fee lands to tribal trust status, along with additional fee to trust applications in the final approval process for Middletown, our combined acreage of forested lands as more than doubled. Our current award, with an additional modification, is only \$33,500. Therefore, the Tribe will be submitting a request for FY2026

forest management funding of \$100,000, a roughly 300% increase over current funding levels. We consider these funds critical to the safety and wellbeing of the Rancheria in performing necessary wildfire mitigation efforts in this region of the State.

Another critical resource for the Tribe is its surface and ground water resources. With well over three hundred acres of tribal trust land located within the Mayacamas mountain range, these water resources equate to hundreds of thousands of acre feet per annum. The Tribe works very hard to ensure that the surface water traversing its lands stays as clean as possible as it flows downstream, recharging ground water aquifers and providing safe drinking water to downstream users. The Bureau's Water Resources Management Program, under its Division of Natural Resources, funds the Tribe's water management program. The Tribe's current FY2025 award announcement is \$93,650. We are still awaiting that award to be made available. We ask that the Subcommittee to increase the FY2026 funding level for this program to better meet the needs of those Tribes that rely on these funds to perform their government responsibilities in protecting these surface water and ground water resources. We also ask that the Subcommittee instruct the Agency to release these funding awards sooner to the Tribes. We struggle to keep pace with our responsibilities with such limited resources when funding awards are not timely delivered by the awarding agencies. The Tribe's request for FY2026 WRMP funding will be \$175,000, an increase of roughly 90% to hire more technicians and cover a larger map of surface and ground water trust acreage.

Energy development capacity building is another key need for the Rancheria. The Tribe has geo-thermal energy resource potential, as well as solar energy generation capacity. We are currently working to secure an energy company working in the geo-thermal space to conduct a feasibility study on that potential resource. However, our main focus is in the area of solar energy generation. Like most Tribes, Middletown needs to become energy independent. Our current dependency on Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) is becoming more and more cost prohibitive. The Tribe currently administers a Tribal Energy Development Grant (TEDC) from the BIA's Division of Energy and Mineral Development (DEMD) for \$120,000. This project will help quantify the financial and administrative investment required to take on the desired level of commercial energy activity for the Tribe as its own Tribal Utility Authority (TUA). Although this funding will help the Tribe begin work on the TUC initiative, it will need additional funding to complete this goal. We therefore request that our FY2026 DEMD award increase by 100% to a total of \$250,000 for FY2026.

I would also like to state for the record that there is a lot of talk that renewable energy technology may not receive the support from the new Administration that it has received in past years. I whole-heartedly disagree with any potential scale back renewable energy support. Granted, domestic hydrocarbon energy development is important to this country's economy, but so is renewable energy. Especially for Tribes like Middletown that do not possess hydrocarbon resources, yet has an abundance of solar energy generation potential. I appeal to this Congress to maintain renewable energy program authorizations and appropriations for FY2026, especially for Indian tribes that have such an abundance of opportunities to harness this energy resource.

Middletown is an established Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) under its own ordinance, approved by the National Park Service and recognized by the State of California. The Tribe is responsible for the protection of its own documented tribal cultural properties (TCP), along with its ancestral burial grounds (ABS), designates and educates its citizens on traditional gathering and medicines (TGM) indigenous to the region and operates its own language preservation program (LPP). The Tribe is in the process of expanding these programs and services to accommodate additional trust land acquisitions and a greater population of its citizens. The Tribe also seeks to enhance its LLP to hopefully create an online tutorial of language courses in the future. The Tribe considers its FY2024 THP allocation of \$88,300 less than 50% of its current THPO needs. We are still awaiting NPS' funding proportions list to be released for current year FY2025, but do not expect those funds to increase beyond the FY2024 levels. Therefore, the Tribe requests that its FY2026 THPO allocation be \$176,600.

Tribal Broadband grant funding for Middletown Rancheria's two year FY2024-2025 funding cycle was \$120,000. The region of the state where the Tribe is located is not well covered with high-speed broadband technology. The Tribe's goal is to erect cell towers and connect fiber optic cabling to all of its homes and businesses throughout the Rancheria. It is currently working with outside consultants to develop a comprehensive plan to accomplish this goal. However, current funding levels prohibit a robust advancement of this necessary goal. This need for better communications technology is not only a quality of life matter, for Middletown, but also key to the success of the Tribe's economic development strategic plan. The Tribe needs to increase this funding allocation by a minimum of 200% above current levels to meet its increased communication enhancement goals. Therefore, Middletown Rancheria requests that its NTBG funding for FY2026-2027 increase to \$250,000.

Environmental Protection Agency

The Tribe currently operates two EPA grants, the General Assistance Program (GAP), the Water Pollution Control Program (106), and a Section 319 Nonpoint Source Management Program, with 106 and 319 combined under an Environmental Performance Partnership Grant (PPG). These grants provide the Tribe with limited resources to establish and operate its Environmental Protection Department, monitor the quality of ground water resources, and monitor the quality of surface water resources at the point of ingress and egress onto and off of tribal trust lands. The Tribe needs to expand its water quality management operations to include newly acquired trust acreage. In addition, the Tribe needs to secure a Section 103 Clean Air Act grant to monitor air quality, and secure a Solid Waste Program grant to properly manage waste materials generated within the community. As with DOI/BIA funding, EPA grant funds are critical to the Tribe's ability to best manage their natural resources and protect the environment in and around the Rancheria. Our total EPA grant funding for FY2025 was \$684,672. Our projected needs for environmental protection services on the Rancheria are expected to grow by more than 50% over the next fiscal year. Therefore, the Tribe requests funding of \$1,100,000 for FY2026 to meet these projected needs.

This concludes my written testimony before the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. I am prepared to provide any additional documentation per the Subcommittee's request, or to answer any questions at this time. Thank you.