



Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians

Executive Branch of Tribal Government

Office of the Chief Executive

TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE VIRGIL WIND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE

Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing Days on February 25, 2025

Chairman Mike Simpson, Ranking Member Chellie Pingree, and Honorable Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies:

It is an honor to testify before your Subcommittee on the appropriation requests of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe (MLBO or the Band). MLBO is a federally recognized Tribe that provides services to 5,065 Band members and employs 3,200 Band and non-Band members throughout our Reservation and the State of Minnesota. The Mille Lacs Reservation is comprised of three separate Districts. District I is on the south shore of Lake Mille Lacs. District II includes areas over 60 miles to the northeast of Lake Mille Lacs, and District III includes areas 80 miles east of Lake Mille Lacs. MLBO also serves 1500 Band members living outside of these three districts. While the Band has been successful in a number of industries, federal appropriations remain critical to ensuring the well-being of our community. For this reason, we are testifying to ask this Subcommittee to:

- I. Direct the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI), Including the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and the Indian Health Service (IHS) to Uphold its Treaty and Trust Obligations to Federally Recognized Tribal Governments.**

This is an unprecedented time for our country. With the issuance of many Executive Orders (EO) and other initiatives coming out of the Executive Branch at such a rapid speed, my administration is working diligently to ensure that the federal government continues to uphold its trust and treaty obligations to the Band while also monitoring the impact of these actions on services provided to our Band members. It is reassuring that DOI issued Secretarial Order No. 3416 which states that the implementation of the President's EO on diversity, equity, and inclusion should not impact "the statutory authorities, treaty, and/or trust obligations of the Department and its Bureaus/Offices to Tribal nations and the Native Hawaiian Community." Likewise, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Acting General Counsel Sean R. Keveney issued guidance stating that the EO "at issue does not apply to programs or activities of [HHS] that affect or serve AI/ANs." Senate Committee on Indian Affairs Chairman Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) also sent a letter to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) urging them to issue guidance across the entire federal government in a similar manner. Until OMB takes such actions, we need your help to ensure the BIA, BIE, and IHS uphold their trust obligations to us by fully funding our critical programs. You have a trust obligation to the Band just as much as the federal government and FY 2026 appropriations are perhaps some of the most powerful tools to holding the federal government accountable in meeting these obligations.

II. Fully Fund the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Education at \$27.1 Billion.

As you have heard time and time again, Indian Country programs are already critically underfunded. We cannot afford additional cuts. This results in reduced healthcare services, weakened public safety efforts, and fewer educational opportunities for our members. Our well-being depends on robust funding to deliver programs and services promised in our Treaties with the federal government and other statutory authorities enacted by Congress.

III. Continue Providing Resources for Native American Languages in BIE Schools

Education – particularly the teaching of our culture and language – is a top priority of the Band for our 1,510 school aged children ages 0-17 living on the Reservation. This is 30 percent of our membership. Our BIE-funded tribal schools include Abinoojiyaag (K-5) and Nay Ah Shing (6-12), which are located in District I of our reservation near Mille Lacs Lake, and the Pine Grove Leadership Academy in District III, which is east of Hinckley, Minnesota, and about 80 miles from District I. Collectively, these three schools are referred to as the Nay Ah Shing School System (NASS). We are a small school system and service about a third of the reservation school-age population. Our schools have a focus on Ojibwe language and culture, which is what keeps our students wanting to attend NASS. For this reason, we need continued funding to support our students and provide necessary resources for our teachers so they can do their best.

IV. Increase Funding for Tribal Police.

Our Tribal police are critical to keeping our community safe and free from drugs, violence, and abuse. To ensure they can do their best job, we need increased funding. The budget for our police department is nearly \$6 million. This funding is used to pay salaries, hire new officers, train our staff, and build community trust. Yet, we receive less than 3 percent of our funding from DOI through our self-governance agreement. 97 percent of our needed funding comes a compilation of funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, our American Rescue Plan dollars, and other Tribal funds to supplement the shortfall. To ensure our police have the best resources available to them to do their job, we ask this Subcommittee to provide additional dollars for new squad cars, additional cameras throughout the Reservation, equipment, drones, water rescue equipment, boats, snowmobiles, ATVs and more. These resources allow our police force to better serve our Band Members. Additionally, we ask this Subcommittee to provide parity for our Tribal law enforcement with federal law enforcement when it comes to their retirement benefits. They should not be treated differently just because they serve our Tribal government.

V. Fully Fund the Indian Health Service (IHS) at \$63 Billion and Provide Advanced Appropriations to Protect Tribal Healthcare Services During the Threat of Government Shutdowns.

American Indians experience greater health disparities than any other group of people in the United States, including higher rates of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and increased mortality rates from preventable illnesses. Despite the significant need for resources, the federal

Testimony of Chief Executive Virgil Wind
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 25, 2025
Page 3 of 3

government spends nearly twice as much on healthcare for individuals in federal prisons than American Indians. On top of this, the Midwest IHS region is the lowest funded among all other IHS regions. We are hopeful that with Rep. Tom Cole (R-OK) at the helm of the House Appropriations Committee and the support the Band has witnessed from this Subcommittee over the last several years that we have the allies needed to increase critical funding for IHS. In addition to fully funding IHS, we need this Subcommittee to continue providing advanced appropriations. With threats of a government shutdown looming this March, advanced appropriations are the only way we can ensure our Band members continue to receive health services promised to them during times of uncertainty.