

Written Testimony of Charles Riley, Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma, New Mexico
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearings
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 26, 2025

Introduction. The Acoma people are an ancient people. Acoma Sky City has been our mesa-top home for at least 1000 years, making it the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States. We, like other Indian Tribes, share a unique, government-to-government relationship with the United States based on our status as sovereign nations. Every Pueblo governor carries a cane from Abraham Lincoln, which was specifically presented to the governors 150 years ago to acknowledge our sovereign authority over our lands and our people. This cane is a physical embodiment of the recognition of our status and of the commitment of the United States to protect and respect our sovereign rights, as well as to support the well-being of our communities pursuant to the federal trust responsibility.

The Federal Trust Responsibility. Acoma joins with other tribes to express its concern and even alarm for recent policy proposals and actions that have the potential to greatly harm Indian Country and are inconsistent with the Federal government's long-established trust responsibility to Tribal Nations, including the freezing and potential reallocation of vital federal funding for Indian programs and the termination of federal employees essential to the implementation of these programs. We urge this Subcommittee to commit to strongly support Federal Indian programs vital to the well-being of Native peoples and to upholding the Federal trust responsibility.

Specific Funding Requests. In furtherance of our unique political relationship and the treaty and trust obligations of the United States towards our people, and this forum, we highlight the following funding requests:

- DOI—Support funding for Indian Water Rights Settlements.
- BLM—Adequate funding to support a comprehensive Resource Management Plan for the Farmington Field Office.
- BIA—\$1.5 million in dedicated funding for NAGPRA implementation.
- BIA—\$1 million for implementation of the Safeguarding Tribal Objects of Patrimony Act.
- BIA—\$50 million for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices.
- BIA—Increase support for traditional irrigation infrastructure projects.
- IHS—Provide permanent advanced appropriations for the Indian Health system.
- IHS—Increase SDPI funding to \$250 million with annual inflation adjustments.
- IHS—Funding for smaller IHS hospitals on the front lines like the Acoma-Cañoncito-Laguna Indian Health Services Facility.
- EPA—Funding to support uranium safety.

Department of the Interior

Funding for Water Rights Settlement. The Pueblo of Acoma, along with other parties, negotiated a water rights settlement with the United States, the State of New Mexico, and other tribes and local communities (Rio San Jose Water Settlement). We ask that the Congress support full funding for this water settlement, which resolves water claims in New Mexico in a manner beneficial to all parties and which will promote economic development and water security for the future.

Bureau of Land Management

Funding for a Comprehensive Resources Management Plan. The Pueblo of Acoma urges Congress to provide adequate funding to support a comprehensive Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) for the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) Farmington Field Office. The current RMP, which guides oil and gas development in the San Juan Basin in New Mexico, is severely outdated and does not reflect modern extraction technologies, such as horizontal drilling, that have drastically expanded the footprint of development into some of the most culturally sensitive and fragile areas surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park—a place of significant cultural importance tied to Acoma and many other Pueblos. Without an updated framework, the BLM lacks the necessary tools to responsibly manage these resources, mitigate impacts, and incorporate the latest archaeological and cultural resource data. Since the existing RMP was drafted, significant advancements have been made in understanding the depth and extent of previously unidentified cultural sites—knowledge that must be integrated into decision-making processes to ensure proper consultation with Tribes and the protection of our irreplaceable heritage.

Bureau of Indian Affairs

\$1.5 Million for Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA)

Enforcement. The provision of dedicated NAGPRA enforcement funding has supported the creation of a new FTE position committed to the protection of Tribal patrimony, as well as Bureau-wide trainings on the law and the harmful consequences that can ensue when it is violated. This is contributing directly to the development of a more culturally competent understanding of the importance of Tribal patrimony to Native peoples for improved law enforcement activities. *We ask that this funding be maintained in FY 2026 and beyond.*

Funding Implementation of the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act. The STOP Act and its regulations will assure the protection of many sensitive tribal items from illegal export. It is important to put in place the necessary resources in the federal government to enable this law to be implemented. *We request that at least \$1 million be allocated for FY 2026 and beyond for the purposes of implementation and enforcement of this law.*

\$40 Million for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs). The preservation of Tribal sacred and cultural sites is a priority for all Indian Country. Damage of these sites is often irreversible, forever altering the way in which we can express ourselves as indigenous people. More Tribes are establishing THPOs under the National Historic Preservation Act to protect this heritage, yet Federal funding has not kept pace with this expansion. It is thus difficult for Tribal governments to meet their preservation compliance duties and responsibilities, which include working with other governments on site identification, conducting surveys, compiling data and samples, documenting best practices, and assisting in museums and research centers that preserve and share Tribal material culture. *We request \$40 million for THPO support.*

Increase BIA Infrastructure Funding for Traditional Irrigation Systems. Pueblo traditional lifestyle and culture has been based on agriculture and irrigated lands for hundreds of years. *We urge Congress to increase support for BIA irrigation projects for all New Mexico Pueblos in FY 2026.*

Bureau of Indian Education

\$250 Million with Self-Governance Funding Mechanism Option for the Special Diabetes Program for Indians (SDPI). Indian Country has seen dramatic improvements in the prevention and treatment of diabetes and diabetes-related conditions under SDPI. *For program stability and*

expansion, we seek an increase in mandatory funding to \$250 million with automatic annual adjustments for medical inflation. We also ask that Congress authorize the use of either a grant (as currently used) or Public Law 93-638 funding mechanisms for SDPI participants consistent with our Tribal sovereignty.

Smaller IHS Hospitals—Funding Health Care at the Front Line. The Acoma-Cañoncito-Laguna Indian Health Services Facility (ACL Hospital) provides critical health care services to the Pueblo of Laguna and the Pueblo of Acoma, as well as emergency health care services to the I-40 corridor and to surrounding Navajo and other communities. *We urge an increase in funding for IHS Preventive Health Services as an investment in future Indian health.*

Environmental Protection Agency

Uranium Mining at Mt. Taylor. Acoma remains deeply concerned about the potential impact of the proposed uranium mining on Mt. Taylor—a mountain sacred to the Acoma people—by Laramide Resources, Inc. and other companies. Our past experience teaches us that uranium mining is dangerous to individuals, to families, and to communities. *We urge support from this Congress to fund and support EPA programs designed to study and report on the impacts of mining, as well as continue to mandate that EPA hold consultations with Tribes.*

Additional Concerns: Federal Workforce Reductions

Finally, Acoma expresses our profound dismay and disappointment at the federal workforce reductions that have led to firings, layoffs and resignations within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and the Indian Health Service (IHS). These abrupt and widespread actions, especially targeting probationary employees, are having real and devastating consequences in our tribal communities.

Detrimental Impact on Education.

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) provides a pathway to success and cultural preservation for our youth. At a time when the achievement gap for our young people remains stark, losing educators and administrators at BIE-operated and tribally controlled schools and tribal colleges, such as the reductions at the New Mexico Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (SIPI), will with a large Native student population will worsen educational disparities, erode student support programs, and harm future generations of Pueblo people.

Threats to Health and Well-being.

The Indian Health Service (IHS) is, for many Pueblo citizens, the only accessible healthcare provider—especially in remote areas, where it may take an hour or more to seek emergency care. Provisions offering access to health care have been a challenge for several years due to understaffing. Reductions in personnel through resignations and layoffs in IHS reduce clinical and administrative staff, leading to longer waiting times, reduced specialized care, and risking the overall health and wellness of our communities—especially our elders and children. We must ensure this lifeline remains intact.

Immediate Harm to Public Safety and Law Enforcement.

While Executive Order 14210 appears to exempt law enforcement, due to chronic understaffing, any reduction in public safety and law enforcement personnel makes adequate security impossible. At the present time, there are just two law enforcement officers in the area that includes the eight northern Pueblos—an area that is greater in size than some smaller states. The

present Executive Order could be interpreted to apply only to law enforcement efforts targeting illegal immigration. There is also concern that personnel in the Department of Justice's Office of Tribal Justice may be fired or will resign, creating severe problems with funding tribal courts and correction facilities. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officers and support staff provide direct law enforcement, emergency response, and critical justice services. They keep our communities safe in geographically remote and often under-resourced areas. Eliminating BIA positions further strains an already overstretched network of law enforcement, leaving our Pueblos—including children, elders, and families—vulnerable to criminal activity and limited in their capacity to respond to emergencies.

Undermining of Economic and Social Services.

BIA, BIE, and IHS employees do more than deliver day-to-day services; they also facilitate infrastructure projects, coordinate water rights settlements, and safeguard natural resources. Drastic workforce reductions threaten economic development initiatives, infrastructure projects, and the basic social services that keep our communities thriving. Reducing staff at federal agencies that partner with us through self-determination contracts erodes the real and substantial progress our Pueblos have worked hard to achieve. Weakening BIA, BIE, and IHS not only dishonors longstanding trust obligations but also signals a departure from federal support for the principles of tribal sovereignty and self-governance.

Request for Immediate Action

1. Immediate Exemption for All BIA and BIE Terminations

We respectfully request that this Subcommittee work with the White House and relevant agencies to exempt all positions serving Indian Country within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) from any current or future reduction in force. These agencies fall under the authority of the Department of the Interior, and their daily functions are indispensable to the well-being and advancement of our Pueblos and other Tribal Nations.

2. Collaboration to Protect IHS Employees

We also respectfully urge this Subcommittee to coordinate with the White House and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to ensure that all Indian Health Service (IHS) positions remain exempt from workforce reductions. Any disruption in healthcare services is a direct threat to the welfare of our citizens and likely violates federal statutes, contradicting the United States' trust obligations to Tribal Nations.

Conclusion

The Pueblo of Acoma respectfully requests this Subcommittee and Congress to uphold the federal trust responsibility by fully supporting essential programs, safeguarding critical federal positions serving Indian Country, and ensuring the viability and growth of our cultural and economic foundations. We stand ready to collaborate with you to protect and advance the well-being of our Pueblo and all Tribal Nations. We thank you for your attention to these urgent matters and look forward to a continuous partnership in achieving these goals.