

**Testimony of Kameron Runnels Before The House Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies**

February 27, 2025,

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Santee Sioux Nation of Nebraska. My name is Kameron Runnels, and I serve as the Vice-Chairman of the Santee Sioux Nation. Additionally, I represent the Great Plains Region as Vice-Chairman of the Great Plains Tribal Leader Health Board, an organization that represents 18 tribes and service areas across the region.

The Santee Sioux Nation is a federally recognized tribe organized under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Our Tribal Council governs under the authority of the Santee Sioux Nation Constitution, which guides our responsibilities to protect and advocate for the well-being of our people. The preamble of our Nation's constitution serves as the foundation for all Council actions, ensuring that we uphold the sovereignty, health, and prosperity of our citizens.

The Unique Status of Tribal Nations

As the 119th Congress begins its work under a new Administration, we urge Congress to uphold the federal government's legal and moral obligations under the treaty and trust responsibilities to Indian Country. The relationship between the United States and Tribal Nations is not discretionary, nor is it a matter of social policy. It is a sacred and legally binding trust relationship rooted in the United States Constitution, treaties, and Supreme Court precedent.

The U.S. Constitution (Article I, Section 2, Clause 3 and Section 8, Clause 3), along with 374 treaties ratified with Indian tribes, established a government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the United States. These treaties are the supreme law of the land, as affirmed in Article VI of the Constitution. In *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), the Supreme Court reaffirmed that these obligations must be honored. Without the cession of vast tracts of land and natural resources—including gold, coal, timber, oil, natural gas, steel, and iron—the United States could not provide refuge for millions seeking freedom of religion or achieve its economic strength.

It is imperative that Congress recognizes that when it legislates, appropriates funds, and takes action regarding Tribal Nations, it does so under a unique trust responsibility. This relationship is based on the political status of Tribal Nations, not on racial classification.

Currently, multiple federal programs serving Tribal Nations are being misclassified as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives by the Administration. As a result, these programs—including those supporting Indian education, healthcare, social services, housing, law enforcement, and emergency response services—have been frozen or delayed.

We must be absolutely clear: Tribal programs are not DEIA initiatives. They exist as a direct result of the federal government's treaty and trust obligations to Tribal Nations. Mislabeling these programs undermines Tribal sovereignty and weakens the federal government's legal commitments to Indian Country.

We call on Congress to ensure that Tribal programs remain properly classified and fully funded to prevent any further disruption of essential services.

Preserving Critical Staffing in Indian Country

The ongoing federal workforce reductions are having a devastating impact on Indian Country. Just last week, the Administration attempted to terminate over 850 Indian Health Service (IHS) employees. This decision comes despite IHS already experiencing a 30% vacancy rate, with an additional 14 to 18 percent of staff on probationary status at any given time.

Similarly, public safety and law enforcement within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) – Office of Justice Services is funded at only 15% of actual need. This is far below the federal minimum standard of 2.8 officers per 1,000 residents. Rural Tribal communities are left with inadequate protection, leading to increased crime, substance abuse, and diminished public safety.

In Addition, last week, two higher institutions, Haskell Indian Nations University and the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute, lost over 60 professional staff and critical educators. These losses put our already understaffed and critical Indian Education system in jeopardy, not to mention the school's accreditation, while simultaneously adding more stress to student education.

We urge Congress to protect critical Indian Country jobs by ensuring sustained federal funding for essential services, including healthcare, public safety, and law enforcement. Without immediate action, these workforce shortages will continue to endanger the health and security of Tribal communities.

Indian Health Service – Sanitation Facilities Construction Funding

Access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation is a fundamental human right. However, thousands of Native American families still lack these basic necessities. As of January 2024, the Indian Health Service (IHS) Sanitation Facilities Construction (SFC) Program has identified 1,346 projects that are necessary to provide safe drinking water and adequate wastewater systems to American Indian and Alaska Native homes. The estimated cost to address this backlog is approximately \$4.66 billion.

The Santee Sioux Nation has been experiencing a drinking water crisis for several years. In early 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notified the Tribe that its public water system contained dangerously high levels of manganese. Manganese contamination has been linked to neurological and behavioral effects, including memory and attention problems, reproductive harm, and kidney damage.

At the direction of the EPA, the Tribe issued notices to all water customers, advising them not to drink the water. Boiling the water only worsens the manganese concentration. As a result of the toxic levels of manganese, and also the high levels of iron and other contaminants in the water that cause the water to taste and smell bad, tribal members are forced to purchase bottled water or seek out a supply of bulk clean water for drinking purposes. This has caused substantial burdens on a tribal population that is already under severe economic distress.

The EPA and IHS have advised the Tribe that a long-term infrastructure solution is required to resolve the dangerous drinking water supply on the Reservation.

We urge Congress to take the following actions:

1. **Increase funding for the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction Program** to at least \$1 billion annually to expedite projects that provide clean drinking water and wastewater infrastructure to tribal communities.
2. **Ensure long-term, sustainable funding** that extends beyond temporary infrastructure packages, allowing tribes to plan and implement comprehensive solutions.
3. **Streamline administrative and regulatory barriers** that delay the allocation and use of federal funds for water and sanitation projects.
4. **Support tribal self-governance and capacity building** by increasing direct funding to tribes to manage and maintain their own water infrastructure systems.

The consequences of inadequate water and sanitation services are severe. The lack of access to clean water has been directly linked to higher rates of disease, including gastrointestinal infections, respiratory illnesses, and chronic health conditions such as diabetes. Moreover, the inability to provide basic sanitation services negatively impacts economic development, education, and overall quality of life for Native communities.

By fully funding water and sanitation projects in Indian Country, Congress can take a critical step toward fulfilling its trust responsibility and ensuring the health, dignity, and prosperity of Native communities.

Supporting Land Buy-Back and Trust Land Restoration

The Santee Sioux Nation's original reservation—established by President Andrew Johnson in 1866—once spanned 115,075 acres. When Nebraska became a state in 1867, Congress gave sections 16 and 36 of each township, including land within Tribal reservation boundaries, were designated as “school lands” to generate revenue for K-12 public education. This, combined with the Dawes Act, Homestead Act, federal land seizures, and the construction of Gavins Point Dam, has reduced our land base to just 9,440 acres.

Adding to these injustices, the Tribe is forced to lease 1,189 acres of its own reservation lands from the State of Nebraska for agricultural purposes. This costs the Tribe \$67,500 annually, funds that should be reinvested into the Tribal economy. This leasing arrangement restricts the Tribe's sovereignty and land restoration efforts while tying these lands to state education funding.

Between 2020 and 2024, Congress appropriated an average of \$9 million annually for land consolidation and restoration efforts through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). However, these appropriations are inadequate to address the scale of land loss suffered by Tribal Nations. Land buy back and reacquisition of trust land are critical to the sovereignty, economic development, and cultural preservation of Native Nations.

The Land Buy-Back Program and restoration of trust lands support the ability of tribes to develop infrastructure, promote sustainable land stewardship, and uphold treaty obligations that the federal government has a responsibility to honor. Restoring land to tribal trust status is not merely a matter of real estate; it is an act of self-determination. Our lands are the foundation of our identity, governance, and cultural traditions. By consolidating land ownership, we strengthen tribal

governance, expand housing opportunities, enhance natural resource management, and create economic enterprises that benefit our communities.

We urge Congress to:

1. This Administration's priority is to reduce the federal footprint, to further that initiative, we suggest reducing the federal holding of lands by returning those lands to Indian Tribes. We suggest Congress turn over excess Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, and other federal land within or adjacent to tribal lands - back to tribes, including land swaps. Without spending federal funds, tribes like Santee Sioux could benefit from this initiative.
2. Increase annual appropriations for the Land Buy-Back Program to at least \$25 million to support Tribal land restoration.
3. Prioritize the restoration of lands to Tribal trust status, allowing Tribes to exercise full sovereignty over their traditional territories.
4. Ensure direct funding for tribes to manage their own land acquisition efforts without unnecessary bureaucratic delays.

Restoring Tribal land ownership is a matter of self-determination, economic stability, and cultural preservation. Congress must take action to ensure that Tribal Nations can reclaim, protect, and utilize their lands for the benefit of future generations.

Conclusion

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your time and commitment to Indian Country. Now is the time to fulfill the federal trust and treaty responsibilities by protecting Tribal programs, funding essential services, and ensuring clean water and land restoration for Native communities.

I appreciate your consideration and welcome any questions.