



THE COWLITZ INDIAN TRIBE
TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE WILLIAM (BILL) IYALL, CHAIRMAN
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES

February 26, 2025

Summary of Agency/Program and Funding Requests

- 1. IHS and Tribal Healthcare Funding*
 - 2. Tribal Public Safety Funding*
 - 3. Support for Tribal Co-Stewardship of Federal Lands and Resources*
 - 4. Funding for Tribal Economic and Energy Development*
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Thank you Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide testimony for the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. The Cowlitz have lived in southwest Washington since time immemorial. After unsuccessful treaty negotiations in the 1850s, the federal government opened Cowlitz lands to non-Indian settlement through an Executive Order without congressional authorization. Our lands were lost and our people were scattered. Despite repeated petitions to the federal government, no land was set aside for the Tribe, and we came to be treated as terminated. Ultimately we were forced to go through the Department of the Interior's administrative recognition process. This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe's restoration to recognition, and the tenth anniversary of the creation of our Reservation in Clark County, Washington.

Today, we have nearly 5,000 enrolled members. The restoration of our recognition and the establishment of our Reservation have allowed the Tribe to strengthen its governmental capacity to engage in self-determination and economic development, preserve our cultural traditions, and protect and provide for our members. Funding from the federal government has been critical in these efforts. The Tribe greatly appreciates the Subcommittee's commitment to providing Indian Country with this kind of much-needed funding. The Tribe requests that the Subcommittee prioritize funding for healthcare, public safety, co-stewardship of federal lands and resources, and economic and energy development opportunities.

I. INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE (IHS) AND TRIBAL HEALTHCARE

The Tribe compacts with IHS under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) to provide healthcare services to its members and others from our four clinics in Vancouver, Longview, DuPont, and Tukwila, Washington. The Tribe is also working to extend healthcare to all its members across the country, regardless of their proximity to the Tribe's medical clinics.

The Forever People

Cowlitz clinics serve thousands of patients every year, both Native and non-Native. Our clinics provide basic healthcare services, mental health, and state-of-the-art drug treatment services including medication-assisted treatment (MAT) and day treatment. Substance abuse and addiction treatment provided by licensed, caring professionals is one of the Tribe's (and the larger community's) most important resources to mitigate the impacts of the opioid epidemic, and treat the disproportionate number of Native Americans suffering from substance abuse and mental health problems.

The Tribe's ability to provide these services rests on continued funding for IHS and Tribal health care programs, as well as an adequate federal health care workforce. Discretionary appropriations for IHS are chronically underfunded and frequently fall far short of meeting healthcare needs, which leads to poor health and significant health disparities for Native Americans. Reductions in those appropriations would have devastating consequences. Reductions to the federal work force at HHS and IHS will have significant, negative impacts on the functioning of tribal health care programs.

Medicaid funding is also critically important to sustaining current programs for tribes. Reimbursements from Medicaid supplement IHS appropriations and assist the Tribe in meeting healthcare needs for our community. For example, Medicaid and additional third party resources have allowed the Tribe to provide much needed Behavioral Health Services to our Tribal members and community. We have integrated our medical and behavioral health care services so that we can treat the entire person. Our Medicaid funds have allowed us to promote better health initiatives and disease prevention activities that include healthy nutrition and exercise. The funds also have enabled us to expand our community garden and grow fresh fruits and vegetables year around. We grow enough fresh produce to extend congregate meals to Tribal elders. The garden also distributes fresh produce for Tribal members at different locations within our community.

We urge that IHS and Tribally-operated facilities must be exempted from any state limitations on eligibility or services that Congress or states may impose due to per capita caps or block grants. The provision of health care services to Native people is a federal trust obligation, and cannot be limited based on State initiatives. We would not be able to sustain our current programs without Medicaid protections for Tribes.

We request that Congress continue to fund IHS and Tribal health care programs at least at current Fiscal Year 2025 levels. As part of that funding, we believe it is critical that IHS receives sufficient funding to include Tribes as a priority in implementation of the new electronic health record system. We also strongly support advance appropriations for IHS, which helps to ensure that Tribal health care is not held hostage to the uncertainty of the annual federal appropriations process, as well as treating contract support costs and 105(l) lease payments as mandatory, not discretionary.

II. TRIBAL PUBLIC SAFETY

The Cowlitz Tribe's Public Safety Department is at the heart of the Tribe's efforts to develop the necessary public safety infrastructure to protect its members and support the Tribe's continued economic growth. Cowlitz Tribal Police must patrol a large service area covering the Reservation and tribal properties outside the Reservation (stretching north to Toledo, about 50 miles away). Cowlitz also has a mutual aid agreement with Clark County, and provides law enforcement services to the neighboring cities of Ridgefield, La Center, and Woodland. Cowlitz Tribal Police are often the first on the scene, particularly when responding to calls from the City of La Center which does not have a police force. Our gaming facility holds dozens of events every year that can host up to 1,200 patrons, and our Tribal Police stretch to adequately staff these events. Calls for service

have increased every year, with 4,312 calls in 2024, an increase of 1,000 calls. The Tribe would like to hire more officers to meet the growing need for law enforcement on the Reservation and in neighboring communities, but we have no space to house additional personnel. The Tribe also would like to purchase new police vehicles to replace over time those with excess mileage and many years of patrol usage, but we need funding to do so.

The Cowlitz Public Safety Department currently operates out of two 17x44 foot modular trailers, which house nineteen Tribal officers and the Tribal Court. The trailers are not equipped to handle basic law enforcement responsibilities – Tribal Police do not have office space, a detention processing area, or holding cells. Public access is limited to a 5x5 foot entry area, and there is nowhere to securely store evidence and records, or to store supplies and equipment. The Tribal Court and Legal Department have very limited space and personnel, which limits the number and type of cases they can handle.

The Tribe has requested federal funding to help defray the cost of planning and design for a new Tribal Public Safety Building, and may seek additional funding for police vehicles. But existing federal funding is wholly inadequate to meet the public safety and justice needs of Indian Country and support tribal law enforcement. According to a February 2024 BIA Report¹ to Congress under the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010, the Tribal public safety and justice need in Indian Country in 2021 was \$3.509 billion – including \$1.7 billion for law enforcement, \$284.2 million for existing detention/corrections programs, and \$1.5 billion for Tribal courts. BIA estimated that overall, for 2021, funding levels for BIA-administered public safety and justice programs for Tribes were *under* 13 percent of total need – meaning there was over \$3 billion in unmet need. That may be an underestimate, and the number continues to increase. Annual appropriations are nowhere near this estimated need. A substantial increase in funding for BIA and tribal law enforcement and facilities is desperately needed to begin to address the public safety needs facing Indian Country. Without that funding, the Cowlitz Public Safety Department will be unable to fulfill its basic mission: to protect the Tribe and its members, integrating community policing and outreach to reduce crime and solve problems, and building trust and open communication with the community.

III. SUPPORT FOR TRIBAL CO-STEWARDSHIP OF FEDERAL LANDS AND RESOURCES

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe supports the active engagement of tribes in the stewardship and management of federal lands. Tribes have unique traditional and historical knowledge about these lands and natural resources, as well as human and financial resources that they can bring to the table, working together with federal land managers, to better manage, conserve, and more efficiently use these federal resources. Through co-stewardship agreements, tribal governments can partner with the federal government to manage and steward federal lands and resources.

For generations, the Cowlitz have lived and cared for the natural resources that are part of the Tribe's homelands – many of which are now owned by the federal government. The Tribe has a long relationship with what is now the Fort Vancouver National Historical Site, which is within the Tribe's historical territory, about fifteen miles from the Cowlitz Reservation and just blocks from Tribal offices. The Fort's location at the confluence of the Columbia and Willamette Rivers was a place of inter-tribal trade long before the Fort was established. The Tribe looks forward to working

¹ Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services, Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021 (Feb. 2024), available at:

https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/2021_tloa_report_final_508_compliant.pdf.

with the Park Service and other tribes that traveled and traded in the area of the Fort to provide the public with a better understanding of the Native populations and their historical and cultural contributions to the Site. Co-stewardship provides Cowlitz with the opportunity to incorporate Native American traditions, expertise, and additional resources into federal land management decisions.

We ask that Congress make funding available to strengthen these partnerships between tribes and federal land managers. These agreements benefit tribes, federal land managers and the federal lands and resources they manage, but more importantly, they benefit the general public that uses and enjoys these federal lands.

IV. INCREASED FUNDING FOR TRIBAL ENERGY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The Department of the Interior plays an important role in supporting tribal energy development on Indian lands – through approval of energy leases and other agreements, and through its Indian Energy Service Center. Providing funding for Interior programs that support tribal energy projects is important and will in turn support industry and economic development.²

This Administration and Congress have prioritized development and production of domestic energy to reduce its dependence on foreign oil.³ Tribes can help in this effort to increase domestic energy production by developing energy resources on Indian lands if they have additional funding and support.

Investment in Indian energy will bring economic opportunities and infrastructure to reservations. As the original stewards of the land, Tribes have the knowledge and experience to responsibly develop energy resources while caring for our land and surrounding communities. Additional BIA funding and staff are needed to support and promote energy development on Indian land. Funding to hire and train a sufficient number of staff with the skills to review energy-related agreements in a timely manner is critical to remedy what is an ongoing barrier to energy development on Indian lands.⁴ Funding to support tribes in developing all types of energy resources is also needed. BIA's FY 2025 budget proposal of \$33.6 million for Energy and Minerals activities must be increased. In sum, additional funding would help to increase domestic energy production and would support economic development opportunities for tribes as well as others involved in developing Indian energy resources.

² A Government Accountability Office (GAO) report notes, "Indian [C]ountry contains considerable oil, gas, and coal resources as well as significant potential for wind, solar, and other renewable energy development." U.S. GAO, GAO-22-103514, *Indian Energy Service Center: Support Activities Have Been Provided, but Goals and Performance measures Should be Defined*, at 1, (2022), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-103514.pdf>.

³ See, e.g., U.S. GAO, *Energy Measures to Reduce U.S. Dependence on Foreign Oil* (1979), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/109116.pdf>.

⁴ U.S. GAO, *Indian Energy Development*, at 23 GAO-17-43 (2016), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-17-43.pdf>; see also U.S. GAO, GAO-18-693T, *Energy Infrastructure permitting: Factors Affecting Timeliness and Efficiency*, at 5-6 (2018), available at <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-693t> (lack of adequate staff with necessary skills is a barrier to energy development); U.S. GAO, GAO-25-106825, *Indian Affairs: Additional Actions Needed to Address Long-Standing Challenges with Workforce Capacity*, at 33 (2024), available at <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-106825.pdf> (BIA still has not implemented processes to hire more staff or assess skill and competency gaps).