

Testimony of Quintin Swanson, Chairman, Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing
House Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 26, 2025

Recommendations:

1. Pass the TERRA Act (H.R.7859, 118th Congress) to eliminate bureaucratic waste and streamline Tribes' ability to address natural disasters.
2. Fortify Tribal disaster resilience and related programs, including those supporting Tribal community-driven relocation.
3. Protect the IHS from budget cuts, rescissions, sequestrations, and funding freezes.
4. Fully fund critical infrastructure investments for the Indian health system.
5. Support mandatory funding for Contract Support Costs and 105(I) leases.

Thank you, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to share our funding priorities for the FY 2026 federal budget. My name is Quintin Swanson, and I am the Chairman of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe. We are located on Washington State's Pacific Coast, 2,800 miles west-by-northwest of Washington, D.C., along the beautiful north shore of Willapa Bay.

As Tribal Chairman and lifelong resident of Tokeland, Washington, I have learned firsthand that vibrant and successful Tribal communities are not possible without attending to our natural resources and our people's health. I appreciate that the Subcommittee is responsible for these same priorities, and it is in that shared spirit of community responsibility that I speak to you today. The following testimony details the Shoalwater community's urgent efforts to move uphill, where we will be protected from the threat of tsunamis and other hazards, and reinforces the need for supporting Tribal natural disaster and community resilience programs. This testimony also outlines our priorities for the FY 2026 Indian Health Service (IHS) budget.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's continuing steps to support Tribes facing natural disasters and related threats, such as recognizing in House Report 118-155 that some coastal Tribes "experience severe weather-related conditions that jeopardize public safety and health." We thank Chairman Simpson, in particular, for serving as co-lead for the TERRA Act during the last Congress, legislation in which Shoalwater has been heavily invested. We have been disheartened, however, by recent trends such as limiting Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funding for critical services like housing improvement and road maintenance, and cutting disaster resilience programs. The events of recent weeks are even more concerning, as Tribes' access to crucial federal funding—including for healthcare and disaster resilience—has been interrupted, delayed, or frozen. Tribal programs have been misidentified as conflicting with the Administration's policy priorities, when in fact they are key to fulfilling the federal government's trust and treaty obligations to Tribes, our citizens, and our communities. The consequences of further funding shortfalls and disruptions will be devastating. We call on this Subcommittee to ensure that Tribal programs are protected and funded, and to increase funding for Tribal disaster and community resilience programs in FY 2026.

Shoalwater's Upland Relocation Project

Tribal communities are uniquely impacted by natural disasters and ecological changes due to a deep connection to our ancestral homelands. Instability threatens our people, our land, and our culture. For Shoalwater, a single tsunami event would take out the entire community—our homes, our government, our economic development opportunities, and what defines us as Shoalwater people. Meanwhile, our Reservation is under threat from slow-moving natural disasters. Our community and the surrounding area will soon be entirely underwater due to the relentless loss of 100–130 feet of coastline per year over the last century—about 2 miles of land to date—combined with the catalytic impact of intensifying winter storms. For now, we are protected only by an earthen embankment constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which requires high-cost maintenance and regular rebuilding. This is not a long-term solution.

Yet, the challenges we face are also an opportunity to rebuild the Shoalwater community more resilient than ever. A few years ago, we purchased 1,200 acres of higher-elevation land adjacent to our Reservation for the purpose of establishing a new community location. The land was completely raw and undeveloped, requiring attention to basic needs such as clearing trees, grading, and building access roads before any vertical development can begin. Shoalwater has been straining our Tribal reserves to plan and implement the early phases of this massive project while maintaining the operation and delivery of essential services to our citizens.

Shoalwater engages with dozens of partners in state and federal government and the private sector to coordinate this upland relocation project, but federal funding remains a primary resource. Moving our community uphill involves substantial expenses for planning, design, and implementation of roads and utilities, housing, and government buildings. Fortunately, we have been able to gather federal resources from the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and other federal agencies. Indian Housing Block Grant Competitive award. However, it has not always been easy to access or use such resources efficiently when differing agencies and award restrictions are involved. Further, these resources have largely been designated for the planning and early development phases of the upland relocation project. We will need more assistance to fully implement the project and protect our community.

If we are unable to obtain the necessary resources to relocate our village, Shoalwater will face the highest cost any community can pay—as each day goes by, our Reservation is closer to destruction by tsunami or vanishing beneath ocean waters. Federal resources will be essential to ensuring this does not happen.

The TERRA Act

We ask the Subcommittee to support the prompt passage of legislation to be reintroduced this Congress as a successor to the bipartisan TERRA Act (H.R.7859, 118th Congress), or Tribal Environmental Resiliency Resources Act, and we thank and acknowledge Chairman Simpson for his inspirational leadership on this bill in the 118th Congress. This legislation is specifically designed to solve many of the problems Shoalwater has encountered in undertaking our upland relocation project. Modeled on the successful Public Law 102-477 program, the TERRA Act would create a hub in the Department of the Interior (DOI) to serve as a single point of contact for Tribes facing natural disasters and related threats, through which such Tribes could identify,

access, and integrate existing federal resources into comprehensive plans tailored to their communities' resilience needs.

Through these comprehensive plans, all the integrated resources can reach the Tribe at the same time, while the interagency framework fosters relationships between the Tribe, DOI, and other federal agencies. This legislation also cuts through bureaucratic red tape by minimizing reporting requirements, eliminating redundancies, and otherwise streamlining government efficiency so the Tribe can implement the integrated programs effectively. Because the legislation touches only existing federal resources, it does not require appropriations or add to the budget.

Without an interagency framework like this, the planning and implementation of our upland relocation project has been a long, drawn-out process that does not meet the urgency of the danger our community faces and requires a level of staff, time, and financial capacity that we simply do not have.

Shoalwater's experience working with DOT provides an example of the need for improving interagency coordination and efficiency. The nature of DOT's emergency road infrastructure funding is such that it will often not be released until an existing road completely fails. If that were to occur with State Route 105, which runs through our Reservation and is endangered by the same threats we face, it will cut our Tribal community off from our schools, banks, and closest groceries, and will cut off many Tribal employees from their homes. Irreparable harm and increased costs to fix the road will result, while such a restriction might have been waived under the TERRA Act, allowing us to address State Route 105's vulnerabilities before complete destruction.

This legislation casts a wide net, covering all manner of natural disaster threats and related community resilience needs faced by Tribal Nations throughout the United States, including but not limited to wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, floods, and tornadoes. It is also designed to meet Tribes where they are in addressing those dangers, from disaster preparedness, mitigation, and relief efforts to community-driven relocation. It has earned widespread support from Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations, including NCAI, NIHB, USET, ATNI, ANHB, AFN, MAST, and SGCETC.

The TERRA Act earned strong bipartisan support in the 118th Congress, and the importance of this legislation to all of Indian Country cannot be overstated. We once again thank Chairman Simpson for his record of support on this matter, and we urge the Members of the Subcommittee to support the successor bill upon its reintroduction by cosponsoring, supporting efforts to move it forward, and seeing it through to full passage during the 119th Congress.

Indian Health Service Priorities

Shoalwater strongly supports increasing the IHS budget. We thank the Subcommittee for its recent work in securing historic investments in the Indian health system. We urge you to build off these victories in carrying out Congress' trust and treaty obligations in FY 2026. These obligations include providing for the health and well-being of Tribal citizens and communities, and exist irrespective of Congress' separate goal to balance the budget.

Permanently Exempt IHS from Budget Cuts, Sequestrations, Rescissions, and Funding Freezes: Our communities have disproportionately suffered as a result of chronic underfunding of the Indian Health system. Despite this, IHS is constantly at risk of additional

budget cuts, sequestrations, rescissions, and funding freezes. As recently as January 2025, critical funding for Tribal health programs was disrupted due to the Office of Management and Budget's implementation of a wide-reaching pause on the delivery of federal financial assistance. We greatly appreciate recent clarification from the Department of Health and Human Services that programs or activities that affect or serve American Indians and Alaska Natives are not to be implicated by at least one of the Executive Orders underlying that funding freeze, which paused funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and environmental justice programs. We ask Congress to implement and advocate for similar exemptions wherever applicable, in recognition of Tribal Nations' sovereignty and political government-to-government relationship with the United States.

We respect the efforts of Congress and the Trump Administration to balance the federal budget and ensure fiscal responsibility in government spending. In carrying out these goals, we ask that Congress and the Administration uphold their trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations. The IHS budget is such a small part of overall federal spending that related budget cuts, rescissions, sequestrations, and funding freezes do not result in any meaningful reduction of the national debt. They do, however, devastate Tribal Nations and communities. We urge Congress to ensure that any budget-balancing or fiscal responsibility efforts hold IHS and our citizens harmless.

Uncertainty greatly impacts our daily operations and ability to plan for the future, which in turn affects the quality and availability of care we are able to provide. We thank the Subcommittee for its commitment to securing advance appropriations for IHS, and we continue to support such appropriations in all future fiscal years.

Support Mandatory Funding for CSC and 105(l) Leases: We strongly support mandatory funding for contract support costs (CSC) and 105(l) leases. This matter is of particular concern in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2024 ruling in *Becerra v. San Carlos Apache* that IHS is required to pay CSC on third-party revenues. While that requirement will dramatically increase the amount needed to pay for CSC, other essential Tribal programs and activities should not be cut or reduced. To permanently protect the rest of the IHS budget, we ask that the Subcommittee continue to work with your colleagues on authorizing committees to enact mandatory appropriations for CSC and 105(l) leases.

Fully Fund Critical Infrastructure Investments: We welcomed the inclusion in the Subcommittee's draft FY 2025 bill of advance appropriations for Health Care Facilities Construction and Sanitation Facilities Construction. Yet, with a multi-billion-dollar backlog and increased inflation, funding to close out the list is not keeping pace with need. This creates situations where Tribal health facilities are unfit and unsafe. Therefore, we recommend increases for Health Care Facilities Construction and Sanitation Facilities Construction in FY 2026.

Conclusion

I thank you for your time and attention, and I invite you to come visit us at Shoalwater. Our doors are open and we look forward to sharing with you our continued strength and resilience as a sovereign Tribal Nation.