

**TESTIMONY OF CODY DESAUTEL, PRESIDENT
INTERTRIBAL TIMBER COUNCIL
PRESENTED TO THE
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE FOR THE INTERIOR,
ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES ON
FY 2026 APPROPRIATIONS FOR THE B.I.A., DOI WILDLAND FIRE
MANAGEMENT,
FEBRUARY 27, 2025**

Introduction and Summary

I am Cody Desautel, President of the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) and Executive Director of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in Washington State. The ITC is a 49-year-old association of forest owning tribes and Alaska Native organizations dedicated to improving the sustainable ecological and economic management of our 19.3 million acres of timberland and woodland held in BIA trust.

Indian forest management creates \$3 for every \$1 of investment. Indian forestry employs nearly 20,000 people. It manages wildlife habitat, aquatic resources, and forests to provide sources of food and medicine for Indian people. Management of Indian forests also generates significant revenue for tribal governments to fund essential governmental services, such as social services, law enforcement, and education.

80% of all the timber produced from Department of Interior lands come from Indian forests. Yet, this harvest level is only half the sustainable annual targets set by tribal governments. Imagine what tribes – big and small – would be able to do with twice the revenue and economic activity they see from current funding levels.

Every ten years, an independent team of scientists review the management of tribal forests and presents their report to Congress, as mandated by statute. The fourth Indian Forest Management Assessment Team report was finalized and presented to Congress last summer. IFMAT IV noted that harvest levels had dropped from 730 million board feet in 1991 to 342 million board feet in 2019, which was the lowest harvest level since the Depression era. Over that same time forested trust land has increased from 15.6 million acres to 19.3 million acres, which is an increase of almost 24 percent.

The 2023 IFMAT report –and those that preceded it--documents the significant and persistent inequity of federal funding for Indian forest management versus other federal forests, such as the U.S. Forest Service and BLM. Based in the IFMAT report's finding, BIA Forestry is funded at about \$2.89 per acre for tribes without hazardous fuels funding and \$4.89 for those who receive hazardous fuels funding.

Compare that to an estimated \$12.24 for National Forest System lands and \$41.41 for western Oregon BLM lands. Thus, forests managed by the BIA for tribes receive three times less than the Forest Service and 14 times less than BLM forests.

With respect to wildfire-related funding, the IFMAT report found that BIA receives \$3.98 per acre for preparedness -- compared to \$10.88 per acre for the U.S. Forest Service. The BIA received \$2.34 per acre for hazardous fuels reduction, while the Forest Service receives \$3.53 per acre. Also, much of this funding is competitive, which makes it difficult to build the capacity needed within tribal programs to treat landscapes at scale with funding uncertainty.

The IFMAT report documents that:

“[BIA] forestry funding, in real terms, has declined 21% over the last 30 years. During this 30-year period Indian forest trust lands have increased from 15.6 million acres to 19.3 million acres, meaning that on a per-acre basis, funding, in real terms, has declined by almost 36% over the last 30 years. Some tribes have expressed that they have not had a budget increase in 30 years; others have had budgets or services reduced.”¹

The result of this inequity is catastrophic on Indian communities. The IFMAT report found reduced funding to BIA for forest management resulted in \$400 million in foregone timber revenue to tribes between 2010-2019. That means \$400 million was not generated to provide essential social, educational, and public safety services to some of the most vulnerable Americans. In addition to the \$400 million in foregone timber revenue, uncharacteristic wildfires have caused additional unquantified losses to timber, wildlife, aquatic, and cultural resources. Those impacts and losses could have been mitigated or reduced with fully funded and staffed programs. The Colville Tribe for example has lost over 1 billion board feet of timber since 2015, with a current market value of approximately \$500 million.

The IFMAT report found that budget parity between BIA-responsible forests, National Forest System and BLM forests would require an additional \$96 million per year for BIA Forestry and \$42 million in additional wildfire funding. In addition, the IFMAT report noted an additional \$1.33 billion needed for upgrading 46,900 miles of roads located on Indian trust lands. The report also noted an additional \$313 million to address the backlog of planned treatments that were not initiated, such as 500,000 of planting, and 500,000 acres of pre-commercial thinning. Other funding issues identified in the report include law enforcement, wild horse and burro management, and facilities.

For comparison, the BLM was appropriated \$141,972,000 for the wild horse and burro program in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2024. That is more than twice what all Indian forests receive nationwide.

This funding inequity can no longer be ignored. The ITC requests that Congress prioritize funding for Indian forests in its FY2025 appropriations bill. This is an urgent matter and tribes continue to pay the price of each additional year of funding inequity.

Unfortunately, the now-enacted FY24 appropriations law reduces BIA “Trust/Natural Resources Management” by nearly \$11 million from the FY23 enacted level. That includes a consequent \$3.1 million cut to BIA Forestry – bringing funding down to \$62 million.

¹ Indian Forest Management Assessment Team, “Assessment of Indian Forests and Forest Management in the United States (2023), p.55

This was a significant move in the wrong direction.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FY 2026

BIA

The ITC has consistently requested that this committee increase funding for tribal trust forest management. This year, we simply ask that Congress acknowledge the disparity in how different federal forests are funded and managed. We request report language in the Interior Appropriations bill that would require reporting to Congress of how much each federal forest management agency is spending, per acre. The IFMAT report contains models for making this calculation.

Funding for BIA Forestry, at a minimum, should be returned to the FY23 level.

DOI Office of Wildland Fire Management

Another funding inequity that impacts everyone is the compensation of wildland firefighters. The Bipartisan Infrastructure bill provided \$500 million in boosted pay and benefits for federal wildland firefighters. However, the law inadvertently neglected to include tribally contracted firefighters who are fighting federal fires on federal lands just like their non-tribal counterparts. Many tribes contract this function from the Department of the Interior. Yet the disparate treatment between tribal and non-tribal firefighters has complicated recruitment and retention of them in Indian Country.

Since June 2022, the ITC has been working with Congress and the Department to address funding inequities between “federal” firefighters and tribal firefighters operating under 638 contracts.

I urge this Committee to embrace a policy that all wildland firefighters – tribal and otherwise – are to be compensated equally. This can be achieved by report language directing the Department to continue making allocations to tribes for competitive compensation for firefighters. Likewise, there could also be an annual requirement that DOI report to Congress on rates of compensation to federal firefighters and tribal contracts to ensure consistency.