

House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
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TRIBAL SELF-SUFFICIENCY: TRIBAL BUFFALO & GRASS-BASED ECONOMIES

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to testify on programs at the Department of Interior (DOI) that support Tribal grass-based economies and Tribal buffalo restoration and management, including at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the National Park Service (NPS), and through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). I am a citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and Vice President at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) for Native Nations. [WWF is highly engaged in supporting Tribal grass-based economies](#) and Tribal buffalo herds. We are also partners in a historic collaboration with the [InterTribal Buffalo Council](#) (ITBC), Native Americans in Philanthropy, and The Nature Conservancy called the [Tribal Buffalo Lifeways Collaboration](#) (TBLC) to support Tribal-led efforts to restore and manage buffalo herds on their lands as a means to achieve not only conservation of this iconic American species but also self-sufficiency, economic development, food security, and cultural and spiritual renewal for Tribal Nations. Our collaboration also partners with other key intertribal entities towards these ends, such as the [Coalition of Large Tribes](#) (COLT). For FY26, we request that the subcommittee maintains or increases funding for the following:

- We request at least \$2,523,000 for the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) under the DOI-BIA-Tribal Management Development Program, to support buffalo herd development. (We also recognize that the actual need is closer to \$14 million.)
- We request Report Language directing \$25 million from DOI-BIA-Trust-Natural Resources Management towards programs, activities and capacity to support Tribal buffalo and related lands. (Currently approximately \$15 million is being internally allocated to these purposes.)
- We support the subcommittee's allocation of at least \$8 million of LWCF funding towards Tribal Land Acquisition in its FY25 bill.
- We request at least \$34 million for Tribal Historic Preservation Officers under the DOI-NPS-Historic Preservation Fund.

I also wish to raise an issue critical to our Tribal partners related to FY25 Tribal buffalo investments that have been frozen and which Tribes are still waiting to receive. Many of these dollars came from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. Our Tribal partners are being directly and negatively impacted by the withholding of these funds and, in solidarity with them, we respectfully request that the Subcommittee do what it can to ensure that FY25 funds that have already been allocated to Tribes through both the DOI and USDA are released without further delay.

Rural and Tribal Grass-based Economies. Some states have urban-based economies, some states have energy or tourism-based economies, and most Great Plains states and Tribes have grass-based economies. For many Tribes healthy grass and grasslands are their most valuable asset. Not only is the health of the soil and grass one of the most important factors in their strong economy, but the buffalo and cattle dependent upon it are essential for both our Tribal and national food independence. Many tribal nations have strong cattle and buffalo ranching economies, which were encouraged by the United States in their Treaties. Healthy American soil and grass is essential to our economic self-sufficiency, and to health and food independence.

226 Tribal Treaties Promise US Support for Tribal Agriculture – For Many Tribes That Means their Grass-Based Economy. Strengthening and expanding Tribal buffalo herds and buffalo ranching is a high cultural, economic, and food priority for Tribal governments. Further, [at least 226 Tribal Treaties have an agricultural provision](#) encouraging Tribes to participate in farming and ranching and promising the United States’ commitment for agricultural assistance. In fact, agricultural assistance provisions are the single most common provision occurring in all Tribal Treaties. By one example:

“In consideration of the foregoing cession of territory and rights... the United States does agree to provide all necessary aid to assist the said Indians in the work of civilization; to furnish to the ...instruction in...agricultural arts, as provided for by the treaty of 1868.”
- Black Hills Treaty Act of February 28, 1877 (19 Stat. 254)

Tribes Are Critical for Grass-Based Economies – In the Great Plains, healthy soils and native grass for livestock grazing is very valuable, and Tribes are some of the best stewards at growing and keeping native grasses. According to [WWF’s 2024 Plow Print Report](#) Native Nations have an outsized positive impact on maintaining native grasslands – with 80% of Tribal lands in the Northern Great Plains remaining as intact native grasslands.

Tribal Buffalo Are Critical for Grass-Based Economies. Tribes have both cattle and buffalo ranchers. WWF works with and supports both cattle and buffalo ranchers. Both have positive impacts on the health of grass and grass-based economies and provide important sources of income and protein for Americans. But, given their intrinsic role in the grassland ecosystems of the Great Plains over millennia, buffalo have an outsized positive impact in promoting healthy soil and grass in the region, including resiliency to drought and floods. The healthier the soil and grass, the more valuable the grass and the stronger the rural and Tribal grass economy. A recent [30-year Kansas State University-led study](#) found that reintroducing buffalo grazing resulted in a 103% increased improvement in grass health compared to ungrazed grasslands, and buffalo more than doubled the health of grasslands - measured by native plant species richness - than cattle-grazed lands.

Tribal Buffalo Are Essential for Tribal and National Food Security. Our weather patterns are more extreme, harming our farmers and ranchers and jeopardizing our national food and protein supplies. Buffalo, however, are native to the United States – they can naturally adapt to almost any extreme weather environment, including adjusting their metabolism as needed. Buffalo are an essential animal for American investment in our national food security. Additionally, the availability of inputs like fertilizer (imported from Ukraine) and vaccines (from China) commonly used in farming and ranching has been unreliable and increasingly expensive, given wars, inflation, and tariffs. Properly raised buffalo need little human intervention and very few of these external inputs.

Buffalo Are Essential to Tribal Health and Fighting Diabetes in the Great Plains. Buffalo meat is lower in harmful fat than its counterparts. [Buffalo meat, like many indigenous plants and animals, is denser in nutrients](#) such as phosphorus, calcium, iron, and magnesium. Return to less processed, whole, fiber rich, native foods is considered essential to lowering the very high diabetes rates in Indian Country. Self-sufficiency requires the ability to feed oneself nutritious food.

REQUESTS

FY25 FUNDING:

Ensure the Release of Already Allocated FY25 Funding to Tribes to Support Tribal Buffalo and Grass Economies. Listed below are some of the only funds in the federal government that go directly to Tribal governments for buffalo ranching and grass-based economies. Many of these are already awarded but are currently frozen. We respectfully request that the Subcommittee do what it can to see that these already allocation FY25 investments in Tribal buffalo and grass economies are released and restored:

A) DOI: Office of Trust Services – Buffalo (\$17.8M). The Office of Trust Services is statutorily required to care for Tribes’ most important asset – their land. For many Tribes this means their grass-based economy and the Tribal buffalo which are proven to be one of the best Tribal grassland managers and economic opportunities. We request that you do what you can to ensure the release of these already allocated FY25 investments without further delay:

- **Tribal Buffalo Herd Development (ITBC)** **\$2.523M**
- **Buffalo Ranching Apprenticeship Program** **\$1M**
- **Tribe’s Buffalo Investment**
 - ND - Mandan Hidatsa Arikara **\$500K**
 - SD - Oglala **\$400K**
 - OK - Osage **\$400K**
- **Buffalo Co-Stewardship**
 - MT - Ft. Peck Tribes **\$500K**
 - MT - Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes **\$500K**
- **Habitat & Grasslands Funds RFP** **\$5M**
- **Cultural & Capacity Building RFP** **\$7M**

B) USDA Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) (\$67M). Just like DOI, USDA has Treaty obligations to support Tribal agriculture. For many Tribes that means strengthening their buffalo herds. These programs are already obligated, and their loss will cripple buffalo economies:

- **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to ITBC for Tribal Buffalo.**
 - WY-MT-SD-ND **\$21.5M**
 - OK **\$21.5M**
 - AZ-NM-CO **\$21.5M**
- **Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities to ITBC for Tribal Buffalo herds.** Funds have already been expended by ITBC under this agreement.
 - Nationwide **\$5M**

FY26 FUNDING:

DOI-BIA-Tribal Management Development Program. No less than \$2.523M

DOI currently provides nominal funding on an annual basis to support tribal-led efforts to restore and manage buffalo herds on tribal lands, of \$2,523,000 for the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) through Tribal Management Development. But the need, demand and opportunities greatly exceed what has been available each year for the past two decades. Last year, Congress advanced the Indian Buffalo Management Act (IBMA), which would create a permanent tribal buffalo management program at the Department of the Interior, in partnership with ITBC, and authorize \$14 million in funding annually to support it. The bill was favorably reported out of relevant Committees in both houses and unanimously passed the Senate, but did not make it on the House calendar before Congress adjourned. We encourage the subcommittee to consider including dedicated funding in line with what the IBMA proposes as part of your FY26 bill. At the very least, we request no less than the \$2.523 million that the subcommittee included in its FY25 bill in FY26 as well.

DOI: BIA Office of Trust Services – Buffalo. \$25M

OTS is statutorily required to care for Tribes' most important asset – their land. For many Tribes this means their grass-based economy and the Tribal buffalo which are proven to be one of the best Tribal grassland managers and economic opportunities. This past year OST internally allocated approximately \$15 million to support various aspects of buffalo. The need is significantly greater, and we request Report Language directing \$25 million of OTS funds towards programs and activities that support Tribal buffalo and lands in FY26.

DOI: Report Language: We request that the Subcommittee include the following report language:

- Direct NPS and USFWS to continue to distribute surplus federal buffalo to Tribal Nations, including from Yellowstone National Park, which contains the most genetically robust population. Distribution of these animals ensures the genetic health of Tribal herds.
- Direct NPS to continue the practice of Tribal surplus animal distribution and follow YNP's science-based buffalo plan.
- Direct NPS to support Tribal buffalo herds on federal lands and continue strengthening Tribal co-stewardship of federal lands and federal buffalo herds.

LWCF funding towards Tribal Land Acquisition. \$8M

We support the Subcommittee's FY25 allocation of at least \$8 million, which represents less than 1% of overall LWCF funding but would provide major benefits to Tribes as essential stewards of the nation's lands, waters, and wildlife, helping to protect areas of both natural and cultural importance.

DOI: NPS Historic Preservation Fund – Tribal (THPOs). \$34M

In 1992, Congress amended the National Historic Preservation Act to authorize THPOs appointed by federally recognized Tribal governments that have agreements with DOI to take on the responsibilities of State Historic Preservation Officers for their Tribal lands. Over 220 NPS-recognized THPOs exercise authority over more than 50 million acres in 30 states, facilitating energy, environmental and historic review processes, and helping to promote economic development in tribal communities. Both the number of THPOs and the responsibilities they must undertake have increased, but funding has not risen commensurately. We ask you to increase funding for THPOs through the Tribal line item to \$34 million in FY26, as part of an overall increase for the NPS Historic Preservation Fund to \$225 million.