

**Donna Thompson, Chair, Fort Hall Business Council, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Days (March 17, 2026)**

My name is Donna Thompson, Chairwoman of the Fort Hall Business Council, the governing body of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes (Tribes) located in southeastern Idaho. The Tribes are extremely grateful to Chairman Mike Simpson, our Representative, for all his efforts to champion initiatives to improve services, facilities, and infrastructure for the Tribes. We also appreciate the bipartisan efforts of this Subcommittee to protect funding for tribal programs and services so that the federal government can better meet its solemn Treaty and Trust obligations. However, much more needs to be done to address the chronic underfunding of tribal programs. We cannot exercise our Treaty rights under the Fort Bridger Treaty of 1868 if the federal government does not protect our natural resources and ensure the health and well-being of our people. We ask for this Subcommittee's help ensuring that the Administration honors its Treaty and Trust responsibility for the following:

1) Advance Appropriations and Mandatory Funding for IHS and BIA

The Tribes are extremely appreciative that advance appropriations for the Indian Health Service (IHS) have been included in appropriations bills for the last several years. As Indian Country just experienced last Fall, advance appropriations are crucial for IHS to maintain continuity of funding and operations. Similarly, advance appropriations for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) would ensure that the Treaty and Trust responsibility is upheld by providing continuity for BIA during a federal government shutdown. Although advance appropriations is a key step in upholding the trust responsibility for health care, the larger issue remains that annual discretionary appropriations for health care do not come close to meeting the needs of Indian Country. Despite steady increases, appropriations for health care still provide less than 50% of the level of need, with much of the increase in funding going towards increases for contract support costs (CSC). As a result, the Indian health system relies heavily on Medicaid to make up the necessary funding. Approximately 50% of tribal members on the Fort Hall Reservation are enrolled in Medicaid, and the Not-Tsoo Gah-nee Indian Health Center serving the Fort Hall Reservation relies heavily on Medicaid funding to provide health services. However, this reliance on Medicaid has several problems. First, the federal trust responsibility is rooted in the relationship between the federal government and tribal governments, but Medicaid is run by states who do not have a trust responsibility. As a result, tribes in different states face different rules for eligibility, services covered, and benefits provided creating inequities in the system and forcing tribes to negotiate with states on the provision of health care, a federal trust responsibility. Further, as we saw last year in the Budget Reconciliation Bill, there is significant pressure from Congress to limit Medicaid spending despite some specific exemptions for American Indians. Instead of continuing to try to stitch the Indian health system together with inadequate discretionary funding and a mismatched mandatory funding program in Medicaid, the provision of health care funding to the IHS should be made fully mandatory to truly uphold the federal Treaty and Trust responsibility. In the meantime, Medicaid should work directly with Tribes, rather than states, to provide healthcare funding. Similarly, key programs within the BIA are essential to the Treaty and Trust responsibility and should be made mandatory to ensure their adequate provision. ***The Tribes request that the Subcommittee continue to include advance appropriations for the IHS and provide advance appropriations for the BIA. The Tribes also request that this Subcommittee provide full mandatory funding for IHS and authorize mandatory funding for key BIA programs.***

2) Indian Health Service Realignment – Focus Should Be on Streamlining Hiring

In the last year, IHS has undertaken two rounds of consultation with Tribes on “Realignment”. These realignment efforts focus on centralizing functions and shifting functions to new regional offices with area offices being reduced into liaisons. Despite these consultations, there is little analysis provided of what these changes will mean in practice, and no discussion about using a phased approach for implementation to increase the likelihood of success. The Tribes are deeply concerned that IHS is focused on shifting offices and creating new offices but is failing to address basic issues that would actually provide better health care services to American Indians. With an approximately 35% vacancy rate for providers, it is critical that IHS fix the broken hiring process. The lack of professional and administrative staff has an enormous impact on access to and quality of care, and the hiring process simply takes too long. Prospective hires can’t wait months just for the screening of their applications, followed by additional months of interviewing and credentialing. They move on to other opportunities. We note that the IHS recently began a hiring effort, which the Tribes appreciate, but unless systematic processes are fixed, the IHS will have limited success. Further, more effort must be made to retain providers. The loss of even one doctor, dentist, or nurse at a local service unit can have a dramatic impact on access to care for a Tribe. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee conduct oversight on how IHS is using funding to streamline hiring and to provide the needed funding to ensure a timely process.*

3) Bureau of Indian Affairs Staffing

Last year, the BIA carried out two deferred resignation programs resulting in more than half of the employees at our already understaffed Fort Hall Agency leaving and causing significant disruptions to service for the Tribes and our tribal members especially with realty and probate. The Agency remains short staffed with just 6 of 17 positions filled. Deferred resignation programs carried out in the name of efficiency have only resulted in insufficient capacity to provide service. Additionally, the Tribes and Tribal members continue to face impediments with the process to convey fee lands into trust. The lack of a local BIA employee to facilitate the process and no approval authorities granted to the local superintendent amplify the challenges. Despite the Department of Interior prioritizing addressing the significant probate backlog, no additional resources have been provided to support the Tribes, and there is an insufficient number of judges to adjudicate the cases. At present, there is an over 5-year backlog in probate cases. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee provide additional funding for the Office of Hearings and Appeals to address the probate backlog and conduct oversight on how the BIA is using funding to restaff itself to be able to provide critical services for the Tribes and our Tribal members.*

4) Increasing Funding for Law Enforcement

The federal government has a Treaty responsibility to provide law enforcement for the Tribes. The Fort Hall Police Department (FHPD) provides law enforcement for the Fort Hall Reservation under a 638 Contract with BIA. Under BIA’s staffing formula, the FHPD should have at least 25 officers, but due to significant underfunding for law enforcement, the FHPD only has funding for 2 officers per 12-hour shift to patrol the entire 550,000-acre Reservation, which spans four counties. This has led to significant burnout among our officers with many leaving to work for outside agencies for higher pay, and it is creating dangerous conditions on the Fort Hall Reservation. According to the BIA’s “Report to Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021”, law enforcement in Indian Country is underfunded by a staggering \$1.47B. We are grateful for the Subcommittee’s efforts to increase

funding in the FY26 Appropriations, but more needs to be done. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee fully fund law enforcement at the level of need, \$1.724B, as identified by the BIA.*

5) Increasing Funding for IHS and EPA Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Programs

The Shoshone-Bannock Tribal Water Utilities operates a water distribution system and a wastewater system. However, the water and wastewater infrastructure on the Fort Hall Reservation is undersized, outdated, and substandard. Piecemeal efforts over the years to replace sections of the system have been inadequate. This poor infrastructure impacts the Tribes' ability to construct new housing and foster economic development on the Reservation. Compounding the issue, there is a severe backlog of drinking water and wastewater projects in Indian country. *The Tribes urge the Subcommittee to provide increased funding for IHS Sanitation Projects and the EPA's Drinking Water Indian Set Aside and Clean Water Indian Set Aside Programs.*

6) Increasing Funding for BIA Road Maintenance Program

Due to insignificant increases in funding and an outdated funding formula for the BIA Road Maintenance program, the Tribes are unable to keep up with road maintenance. Without a significant increase of road maintenance funding, the life of our roads, railway crossings, and bridges is drastically reduced, resulting in increased risks for highway fatalities and injuries. Due to the lack of maintenance, paved road mileage is decreasing, as road failures are turned into gravel roads. At least 75% of our paved roads are in danger of failure due to cracking and potholes. The Tribes appreciate the Subcommittee's attempts to increase funding for this critical program, however, BIA Road Maintenance continues to be flat-funded at \$39.2M. The BIA's Road Maintenance Program continues to be authorized at \$58M. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee appropriate the fully authorized amount of \$58M for BIA Road Maintenance.*

7) Increasing Funding for BIE Teachers

The Tribes remain concerned about competitive salaries for teachers at our Tribally controlled BIE school. Current levels prevent offering competitive salaries for current and new qualified teachers without including non-recurring supplemental funding. This is not sustainable. Although the BIE has updated its teacher salary schedule to be more competitive, the School is not receiving enough funding to meet the BIE teacher salary schedule. As a result, it is experiencing great difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. *We urge the Subcommittee to increase funding for teacher salaries to enable BIE Schools to be competitive with non-BIE schools.*

8) BIA Wildland Fire Program

Fort Hall is located in an area with frequent wildfires that continue to increase in size and cost. Recently, the DOI has been undertaking a reorganization of wildland firefighting. Despite stated concerns of this Subcommittee, DOI is moving forward with an internal reorganization of wildland firefighting, with the six firefighters assigned to Fort Hall now reporting to a regional wildland fire office. The Tribes have significant concerns with this reorganization. Specifically, the Tribes are concerned that there will be enough funding to meet the needs for the Reservation, that there is no loss of coverage for firefighting or mitigation activities on the Reservation, that there is no reallocation of equipment from the Reservation, and retired equipment will be replaced. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee ensure that Wildland Fire services not be impacted on the Reservation.*

9) Indian Youth Service Corps (IYSC) Funding

The IYSC, authorized in 2019, provides funding for Tribal youth to carry out conservation programs. Last year, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes reached an agreement with a non-profit organization that had a funding agreement with the National Park Service (NPS) for twelve of our Tribal youth to conduct hazardous fuels management, wildlife habitat management and cultural resources protection at Craters of the Moon National Monument & Reserve and the City of Rocks National Reserve. In late September, the non-profit organization was informed that their funding agreement was cancelled with no details provided on the reason. This is an important program that not only provides workforce training for Tribal youth but also conducts important work to mitigate wildfire. *The Tribes request that the Subcommittee ensure funding for the IYSC in FY26 and FY27 to carry out this project for the Shoshone-Bannock Tribal youth.*

10) Enabling Salmon Restoration in the Columbia River Basin

The Shoshone-Bannock Tribes (Tribes) hold Treaty-reserved rights to hunt, fish, and gather on the unoccupied lands of the U.S. (15 Stat. 673). Appropriations to the Tribes for fish and wildlife programs remain at unsustainable levels, impeding our ability to execute priority projects which are essential to protecting trust resources. Therefore, the Tribes make the following appropriation requests for high-priority needs to sustain recovery of wildlife and ESA-listed fish including planning and design, implementation, monitoring and research through the following BIA recurring funded programs: Resident Fisheries (\$300,000/yr), Wildlife (\$300,000/yr), Environmental (\$300,000/yr) and Columbia River Fisheries Management (\$500,000/yr). Finally, the Tribes request appropriations to develop a Hells Canyon Complex historic and ongoing impacts study to analyze generational effects on the Tribes' Treaty rights, culture, lifeways, etc. to capture the actual circumstances faced by the Tribes and to support USFWS/LSRCP hatchery capital appropriation requests as they align with our Tribal priorities.

11) Advancing the Reclamation of Gay Mine

The Gay Mine is an open pit phosphate mine that operated from 1946 until 1993 on approximately 7,000 acres of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. The site has 158 pits ranging in size from 15-20 acres, many with walls over 50 feet high that are failing, and 57 mill shale piles with over 30 million tons of overburden. Since closing in 1993, minimal reclamation activities have taken place under BLM and BIA oversight. In 2010, the EPA began to conduct a study on the remediation of soil, vegetation, and water contamination. While the initial discussions take place, work must also be done to truly reclaim the pits and mill shale piles to make the land safe and usable again. *The Tribes request to continue working with the Subcommittee to develop a long-term reclamation plan for the Gay Mine area.*

12) Addressing Reservation Boundary Issues

An 1867 Executive Order promised the Tribes 1.8M acres of land. However, the Tribes only received 1.2M acres when the exterior boundaries of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation were drawn following an 1873 survey. In 2018, at the request of the Tribes, the BLM undertook a review of the historical documents, maps, and correspondence of the agents responsible for drawing the Reservation's boundary. However, the Tribes have serious concerns regarding the conclusions of the report, including the number of acres in question. We appreciate the Subcommittee's prior efforts to direct the BIA to conduct a review of that report, and the BIA did begin productive discussions with the Tribes. Now, the Tribes seek continued dialogue with the new Administration.