

**TESTIMONY OF COUNCIL MEMBER MICHAEL DOLSON OF THE  
CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES OF THE FLATHEAD  
RESERVATION  
TO THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR AND RELATED AGENCIES ON  
THE IHS, BIA AND EPA FISCAL YEAR 2027 BUDGET**

**March 18, 2026**

My name is Michael Dolson and I am a member of the Tribal Council of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (CSKT). We appreciate this Subcommittee's dedication to Indian Country and the opportunity to present testimony on these important appropriations.

For thousands of years the Bitterroot Salish, Upper Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai people thrived in what is now Montana, Idaho, and British Columbia. Under the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, the Flathead Reservation was reserved as our permanent homeland and encompasses over 1.2 million acres in western Montana. Our Tribes have approximately 8,000 enrolled members, with roughly 5,000 living on the Reservation alongside a total population of 30,000 people.

As a Self-Governance tribe, we have for decades carried out the functions of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Services, and the Environmental Protection Agency under Treatment as States authorities. Local control has allowed us to stretch limited resources far beyond the capabilities of the federal government by eliminating bureaucracy and red tape. However, limitations and disruptions in federal resources present significant challenges. Federal shutdowns, funding freezes, and employment disruptions have severe consequences for Indian tribes. At CSKT, these challenges are exacerbated by unprecedented drought and the ongoing mental health and addiction crises facing our communities.

**INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE FUNDING**

Our Reservation continues to face a profound mental health and addiction crisis, significantly worsened by fentanyl and other high-potency opioids. While our Tribes provides essential treatment, existing resources remain inadequate. Substance use disorder is treatable, and CSKT is engaged in several promising initiatives. However, their long-term success depends on full and consistent funding for the Indian Health Service.

We are deeply grateful for the forward funding of IHS, which allows CSKT to draw down its entire budget in October. This stability is critical for recruiting and retaining doctors, nurses, and other professionals across our remote communities, where distances often range from 60 to 80 miles. Without forward funding, critical life-saving projects risk delay or failure due to funding interruptions.

Despite these successes, the Indian Health Service continues to frustrate health care delivery by failing to fully reimburse Tribes for contract support costs. CSKT maintains that Tribes should not bear the financial burden of carrying out federal functions without the same resources the federal government utilizes. These costs represent essential preventative and emergency care

necessary for a healthy Tribal community. We cannot overstate the importance of fully funding contract support costs for Tribes faithfully carrying out federal health care functions under self-governance.

## **BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS**

We have continued to see erosion of funding for critical BIA programs. Appropriations have not kept pace with true need, straining our ability to deliver essential services.

Parallel to our health initiatives, the CSKT Tribal Council has undertaken an aggressive response to the intersecting crises of mental health, addiction, and housing through the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Tiwahe Initiative. Established to reduce poverty, domestic violence, and youth suicide, Tiwahe has become the cornerstone of our efforts to improve family well-being. We appreciate the Subcommittee's past support and strongly encourage additional funding for Fiscal Year 2027 to support Tiwahe Social Services, Housing, Tribal Justice Support, and ICWA programs. We specifically request an additional \$2 million in Tiwahe Job Placement and Training funds and \$5 million to establish a Tribal Economic Development component. These resources will allow us to expand our Healing to Wellness courts and foster a multi-disciplinary approach to socioeconomic stability.

Our participation in Tiwahe has already led to significant strides in building a coordinated service delivery system. Because nearly 90% of our child removals are linked to drug and alcohol use, braiding social services with treatment and healing courts has been crucial for family reunification. We also emphasize the necessity of incorporating Ksanka, Séliš, and Q̄lispé language and cultural perspectives into all programming, as cultural identity is a primary factor in long-term recovery. We urge the Subcommittee to provide this funding directly to Tribes rather than through competitive grants.

The crisis of homelessness and overcrowding on our Reservation has reached unprecedented levels, driven by a post-pandemic influx of remote workers that has pushed the average home price to \$700,000—a price the typical Tribal family cannot afford. The housing shortage is further complicated by the addiction crisis, as many members are disqualified from housing due to behavioral health issues. Addressing these shortages and necessary infrastructure—water, sewer, and broadband—is critical to community stability.

Furthermore, our Tribal Courts and Law Enforcement are under immense strain. In 2025 alone, CSKT dispatch handled 140,048 calls, with only 24 officers responding to over 2,300 criminal incidents. During that period, we confiscated over 3,000 fentanyl pills and 15 pounds of methamphetamine. These statistics underscore the dire need for increased resources for public safety and corrections. Finally, funding for a consolidated Tribal Justice Center is vital to ensure we have the detention capacity and treatment space required to reduce recidivism.

## **NATURAL RESOURCES: FOREST MANAGEMENT AND WILDLAND FIRE**

CSKT faces unprecedented challenges in managing our forested homelands and protecting our community from catastrophic wildfire. These challenges threaten both our economic stability and our Trust resources.

Since 1990 Northwest Montana has lost 36 large lumber mills. The Tribes now have only two mills to which we can sell our timber. Without mills, we have no way to pay for much-needed vegetation and fuels management, competition for timber is minimal, and jobs in the timber industry are disappearing. We also have fewer tribal loggers than just a few years ago and have not attracted many new entrants to the field. The majority of our tribal loggers are nearing retirement with no replacements on the horizon. Logging is an expensive and dangerous profession and without mill infrastructure to support the industry the critical services that loggers provide may be lost.

Furthermore, retention and recruitment of trained forestry staff within the Tribal government has become a serious challenge, especially for professional foresters. Currently, our Tribal Forestry program is down to four timber sale field foresters and a program manager. In the past, our Forestry program had as many as 10 or more timber sale foresters.

To address these interconnected crises, we urge the Committee to establish dedicated funding streams to support mill infrastructure, forestry education, and workforce development for the next generation of loggers. Forestry and the timber industry are critical to the continued health of our forests and the prevention of dangerous wildfires.

Congress previously mandated an assessment of Indian Forestry programs. The Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) has published four decadal reports documenting persistent lack of funding and structural problems. Yet no solutions have been implemented. We urge Congress to act on the IFMAT findings by enacting legislation that addresses systemic underfunding.

Regarding wildland fire, as DOI wildfire programs transition into the United States Wildland Fire Service (USWFS), it is important to recognize that Tribes are part of this transition. The Secretary of the Interior must have the necessary resources to fulfill his responsibility as trustee of the Tribes' resources. In addition, we must all work together to ensure that the achievements made through "638 contracts" under the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act are incorporated into the transition into the U.S. Wildland Fire Service. We hope that the transition to the new Service will help to remedy the chronic underfunding and delayed funding mechanisms associated with the fire programs previously housed under the BIA. Congress should ensure adequate funding for the Service, including funding specifically dedicated to Tribal programs. Importantly, Congress should ensure that Tribal employees under 638 contracts with the Secretary have the ability to pay those employees at the same level as federal employees. Congress can remedy this disparity by making clear in its appropriations to the Service and the Interior Department that Tribal staff and contractors should be afforded equal pay and benefits for their time fighting fire, even if those employees perform other duties outside of fire season. Congress should also consider advance appropriations for fire prevention and suppression activities so that lapses in appropriations do not endanger people, property or resources. Similarly, Tribal Preparedness funding must be increased to support administrative functions, operations, and firefighter development.

The stakes could not be higher. Over the past five years, fires have ravaged over 80,000 acres of our homelands, destroying millions in potential timber revenue, over 50 structures, and causing significant damage to cultural resources.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY**

We thank the Committee for its continued support of Tribal environmental programs. Additional resources in recent cycles for Solid and Hazardous Waste and the Brownfields Program have made significant improvements to communities like ours. However, we strenuously urge Congress to prioritize adequate funding for EPA programs for Tribal communities. These locally administered programs provide critical services to protect Tribal Trust Resources and community health.

Unfortunately, Tribal EPA programs steadily decreased for nearly a decade and a half, placing an unreasonable drain on our ability to monitor, reduce, and prevent pollution. The federal trust responsibility requires the United States to ensure we have a livable homeland where pollution levels are safe. Without stable funding, CSKT cannot build sustainable programs to protect our environment.

Critical programs for protecting our permanent homeland have seen stagnation or decreases over the past decade, including the Clean Water Act Section 106 Program, the Wetland Program, the Clean Air Act Sections 103 and 105, the Underground Storage Tanks Program, and the Tribal FIFRA Program. We urge the Committee to restore and increase funding for these essential programs to fulfill the trust responsibility and protect the health of our people and homelands.