



**Testimony of the
Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation
Vice Chairman Mike Natchees**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Fiscal Year 2027 Appropriations**

March 18, 2026

Chair Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 Appropriations. Our testimony focuses on funding needed for water infrastructure to support energy development as well as law enforcement infrastructure. The United States, including Congress, must fulfill its trust and treaty obligations to Indian tribes and address chronic underfunding of federal programs supporting tribes.

The Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, located in northeastern Utah, is the second largest in the United States, covering roughly 4.5 million acres. The Tribe has approximately 2,700 members and over half of our members live on the Reservation. We are located in Fort Duchesne, Utah.

**WATER NEEDS AND GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT IN RELATION TO ENERGY
PRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT**

Today, the Ute Indian Tribe is blessed with having the largest producing oil and gas sector in the State of Utah. Our tribal production currently supports over 8,300 direct and indirect jobs and has an economic impact on the State of over \$1.5 billion in direct and induced value, but we can clearly do more. So, what I am asking for today impacts American jobs and the economies of Utah and the U.S. in a significant way.

As any oil and gas producer will tell you, water is critical to our ability to engage in domestic energy production. We need it for drilling, for extraction, and for keeping our systems cool. After years of unnecessary litigation, the federal government was finally forced to admit two things: 1) that the Ute Indian Tribe had a legally reserved right to far more water than it was receiving from the Colorado River Basin system, and 2) that those tribal rights could not be afforded unless and until the federal government constructed one or more water storage facilities for the Tribe.

Utah is the third most arid state in the nation. The only viable source of water is the winter snowmelt. This means access to water in the drier summer months is dictated by the ability to store that snowmelt. Yet, despite our obvious needs and the clearly defined federal duties, I will describe how the federal government has repeatedly broken its promises to the Tribe regarding the construction of infrastructure, water storage, and delivery systems necessary to fulfill its legal obligations to us. This is not new. It has been the case for administration after administration.

Despite the fact that the Tribe has spent millions of dollars proving that it owns certain key water reserves, and that it needs those reserves now more than ever for tribal and domestic farming, ranching, and domestic energy production, no appropriations request for tribal water storage has been forthcoming.

Congress attempted to remedy this fact in 1992, when it formally authorized appropriations for Ute Tribal water storage in its enactment of the Central Utah Project Completion Act (“CUPCA”). Yet, not once during the ensuing thirty-four years has any administration requested appropriated dollars to fulfill what both the federal courts and Congress have found to be the United States’ legal obligation to the Ute Indian Tribe. Thus, we are compelled to ask this Subcommittee to step in to force the Administration to live up to this critical obligation by appropriating monies to plan, construct, and adequately fund water storage for our tribe.

This issue has only become more critical as the Colorado River drought continues. Given recent disputes around the world, and the President’s very vocal call for increased domestic energy production, the Ute Indian Tribe stands ready and willing to meet the call. To do that, however, we require the water and the resources necessary to maintain and expand our level of production.

The Ute Indian Tribe is also experiencing an unfortunate lack of cooperation from the EPA. Despite our numerous requests to have a “seat at the table” whenever EPA suggests that one or more federal violations and fines should be brought against a non-Indian oil and gas producer on our tribal lands, today, we regularly learn about such actions after the fact.

Worse yet, when EPA fines are imposed on these producers, the money collected is not used to address the underlying “local” violation. Instead, it goes to the U.S. Treasury where it is not seen again, and we are left with the problem locally. This is wrong, especially when the entire purpose of EPA is to prevent and mediate environmental issues which impact the “local” environment and those who live there. In short, we are not requesting a new appropriation. We are simply asking this Committee to redirect the money that the U.S. is already collecting from Ute based fines to the local purpose for which the fine was imposed in the first place.

Finally, our unique relationship with the federal government means that the Ute Indian Tribe, along with other federally recognized Tribes across the United States, often find ourselves and our businesses entangled in national initiatives not designed for us. Initiatives that, by any stretch of the imagination, were never intended to apply to our tribal government programs or our on-reservation businesses. As a result, we spend a great deal of time, effort, and money trying to get exceptions to national policies, which should never have been applied to our programs in the first place. These efforts take place while our businesses and economic development efforts suffer. I am here today to ask for your help with yet another example of this issue.

Over recent years, the BIA has developed very specific rules for approving, amending and terminating Indian oil and gas permits and related real estate documents. While we know that there are on-going efforts to streamline these approval processes, the truth is that it will take some time to accomplish this, if it happens at all. Amending federal regulations is a long and tedious process.

In the interim, we and the other energy Tribes throughout this country, are saddled with those existing BIA Indian energy rules and procedures. While this has always been a burden, what has changed recently is the loss of the federal personnel required to actually implement those policies. BIA has lost personnel because of buyouts, early retirement offers, administrative budget cuts, and DOGE activities. Worse yet, federal hiring freezes, lease freezes, and similar activities, which we cannot seem to secure exemptions for positions already funded, have crippled BIA's efforts to replace that personnel. Equally problematic is the underfunding and threatened cuts to the BIA Lakewood Indian Energy Support Center which is supposed to fill in these gaps in federal staff capabilities.

Mr. Chairman, the federal government created these rules, we did not. Thus, doesn't it have an obligation to fill the positions necessary to implement them? That is all we are asking for: a practical solution to a practical problem.

Congress foresaw something like this happening and recognized that many of these problems could be solved if the tribes, who are interested and capable, could take over a number of these federal functions. Thus, it provided for Indian Energy Resource Agreements (TERAs) when it enacted amendments to the Indian Energy Development and Self Determination Act in 2017. This is something the Ute Indian Tribe has worked on for a year now, only to learn that while that Act authorized those Agreements, and also authorizes the funding required to implement them, no such dollars have ever been appropriated for BIA technical assistance, tribal planning or start up, or for tribal operations of those TERA entities. This represents another illogical half step and a disjointed federal effort which is undermining President Trump's goal of increasing domestic oil production.

The President calls for it, and then disjointed federal regulations, staffing, and funding shortages undermines it. It makes no sense. Worse yet, it is costing us millions in delays, and our inability to utilize a vast amount of our existing energy resources. We are not alone in this. At a recent national Indian energy Tribes meeting sponsored by Secretary Burgum, I heard these same sentiments voiced time and time again. Please get us out of the revolving door by appropriating sufficient funding to staff these federal positions and grant us exemptions from these federal freezes that have nothing to do with us.

CRITICAL FUNDING NEEDS FOR BIA LAW ENFORCEMENT

Tribal law enforcement critically needs your help. One of the most underfunded and dangerous situations created by the BIA is our lack of adequate law enforcement. Today, we have only 3 BIA funded law enforcement officers on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation (U & O), despite the fact that U & O is the second largest reservation in the United States. This not only makes response time ridiculously slow, sometimes up to 40 minutes or more, it also makes it dangerous and virtually impossible for us to adequately combat the influx of illegal drugs which have now entered our community. Today, the Ute Indian Tribe is supplementing over 40% of our law enforcement program, providing both additional officers and equipment, but even that is not enough.

Forcing our police officers to work alone is dangerous. Even the great U.S. military does not send a single soldier into a dangerous situation without backup every single day. Worse yet, our lack of adequate police officers also endangers our tribal staff working in the field, especially our Fish and Game Officers who readily encounter trespassers and people carrying, using or selling drugs. Just recently, one of our Fish and Game officers encountered such a situation. The Fish and Gaming Officer encountered individuals in illegal trespass on tribal land driving a UTV. Because she lacked a Special Law Enforcement Commission, which she had applied for, but which was held up by federal red tape, she was not able to make a federal arrest. Instead, our Fish and Gaming Officer was assaulted and injured. Following that confrontation, instead of accepting the situation that federal understaffing had created, she was charged with exceeding her authority and prosecuted by the federal government.

With an absolute need to protect its people, the Ute Indian Tribe was forced to close access to the reservation and placed a moratorium on new leases. Actions like this seriously undermine our businesses and everyday way of life, but they are necessary to prevent another injury to one of our staff.

Modern police procedures are designed for the safety of the officer, the accused, and the general public. Simply put, when two or more officers carrying federal badges, with back up available, encounter someone breaking the law things generally go better for everyone. Every day, on every law enforcement program we watch on television, we hear the words “wait for back-up.” That is what the federal police academy teaches every officer candidate to do when approaching a dangerous situation. Unfortunately, on our Reservation, this training does not match our reality.

This is one of the main reasons that the Ute Indian Tribe has pushed the BIA to immediately approve federal Special Law Enforcement Commissions (SLECs) for every qualified Fish and Game Officer who seeks it. Simply put, our police officers need help, and our otherwise eligible Fish and Game officers need official federal arrest authority. This should not be a problem, as most of our officers are already graduates of federal and Utah State police academies. In short, these Fish and Gaming officers need the public and the courts to know that they can and will arrest those who break the law.

As President Trump has readily explained, illegal narcotics have already been brought into our country and U.S. law needs to be respected again. Both of these goals require your help by funding the same number of police officers on our reservation as are funded in the Urban areas of this country.

CONCLUSION

Congress must uphold its trust and treaty responsibilities to the Ute Indian Tribe and other tribes. Chronic underfunding of programs supporting Indian tribes hampers our ability to develop our resources, promote our economies, and provide safe communities.