

# Fort Belknap Indian Community



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Fort Belknap Indian Community  
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Fort Belknap Indian Community  
(Elected to administer the affairs of the community and  
to represent the Assiniboiné and the Gros Ventre  
Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation)

## FORT BELKNAP INDIAN COMMUNITY TESTIMONY ON FISCAL YEAR 2027 APPROPRIATIONS

### COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE PUBLIC WITNESS DAYS

**March 18, 2026**

Chair Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 priorities of the Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC). My name is Cody Shambo and I serve as the Mountain Gros Ventre Representative of the FBIC Council. Our Fort Belknap Reservation is the homeland to the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Nakoda (Assiniboiné) Nations. Our Reservation was established through a series of Treaties and Agreements with the United States. We are a large land base tribe with 1092 square miles of tribal land. We are dedicated to the preservation of our homelands, resources, and culture for generations to come.

Despite our rich culture and homelands, FBIC is forced to travel to Washington, D.C. to advocate for the basic fulfillment of the United States' Treaty and Trust responsibilities. When our ancestors ceded vast territories and resources, they did so in exchange for a permanent homeland and the guaranteed provision of essential services. The United States has failed to live up to those commitments and Indian Affairs programs are chronically underfunded.

In contrast to the dramatic cuts proposed by the Administration, we appreciate the efforts of the Subcommittee to provide substantial funding for Indian Affairs programs in FY 2026. Despite these efforts the United States is still far behind. FBIC urges this Subcommittee to fully fund Indian Affairs programs to meet the needs of our communities. The United States must honor its solemn word and provide the robust funding necessary for FBIC to thrive.

### **INDIAN WATER RIGHTS SETTLEMENTS NEED A DEDICATED FUNDING SOURCE**

Passage of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Rights Settlement Act, Title I of the Northern Montana Water Security Act of 2025 (S. 241 and H.R. 907), is our highest priority. More than 100 years ago, we went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court to fight for our water rights in the seminal *Winters vs. United States* case. In 1908, the Supreme Court held that the establishment of our Reservation included the water rights necessary for us to make a homeland. This is known as the *Winters* doctrine and provides the basis for all tribes to protect and quantify their Indian reserved water rights. More than a century later, it is time for Congress to ratify our Water Settlement Act and provide the funding needed to settle damages claims against the United States.

Our Water Rights Settlement Act is based on our treaty rights and more than 35 years of negotiations between FBIC and the Department of the Interior, Department of Justice, State of

Montana, water users, and local counties. Its passage will resolve pending litigation before the Montana Water Court, which is ready to be adjudicated, and before the federal court, which is currently stayed pending a successful settlement.

The Act continues to have strong support from the Montana Governor and Lt. Governor, past Administrations, the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council, Milk River Joint Board of Control, St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group, local counties, water users, stockmen, conservation groups, tribal members, and more. This consensus is reflected in the Act's legislative momentum having already passed the Senate twice with bipartisan support. By ratifying our Water Settlement, Congress will stabilize the regional agricultural economy and provide long-term benefits to both tribal ranchers and farmers while benefiting surrounding communities.

Passage of our Water Rights Settlement Act is just the first step. This Subcommittee must also provide the funding necessary to settle our damages claims and build long neglected water infrastructure on our Reservation. A permanent funding source is needed. The Subcommittee must be able to utilize the Department of Justice Settlement Fund, or the Bureau of Reclamation Water Settlement Fund must be permanently reauthorized.

Our Water Settlement Act provides about \$1.3 billion to construct and improve water infrastructure on our Reservation and throughout northcentral Montana, including:

- \$416 million to rehabilitate, modernize, and expand the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project and restore and develop other irrigation systems;
- \$119 million for Southern Tributary Irrigation Project and Peoples Creek Irrigation Project;
- \$443 million to provide a clean and secure water supply and construct domestic, municipal, and commercial water supply and wastewater removal systems on the Reservation;
- \$300 million to rehabilitate the St. Mary Canal and Dodson South Canal, part of the federal Milk River Project for non-tribal water users in northcentral Montana; and
- \$66 million for O&M funding to support tribal irrigators on the Reservation.

Without Congressional passage and funding of this settlement:

- 35 years of negotiations between the FBIC, State, and U.S. to reach the most cost-effective solution will be lost and the resulting litigation will start the process over again;
- decades of future litigation before the Montana Water Court will be needed to hear at least 31,000 water right claims involving non-tribal farmers, ranchers, and municipalities;
- aging water infrastructure more than 100 years old will threaten the economy, towns, and livelihood of the entire region including: more than 120,000 acres of irrigated non-tribal lands in the Milk River Basin of north-central Montana and more than 30,000 acres of irrigation on the Reservation that feeds about one million people a year; drinking water for more than 20,000 people; and 700 river miles of wildlife habitat;
- about 10 percent of Montana's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a significant portion of the agricultural economy of the State, would be threatened; and
- FBIC would be forced to bring a separate claim against the U.S. for mismanagement of its waters and failure to construct and maintain the BIA Fort Belknap Indian Irrigation Project.

Funding Indian water settlements is critical for meeting deadlines in our Water Settlement Act that provide for enforceability and finality. None of this works, if Congress does not provide substantial and timely funding to implement Indian water settlement legislation. Just as the Federal government must fulfill its trust responsibility by funding Indian water settlements, it must also address the equally urgent and chronic underfunding of our public safety infrastructure.

### **CRITICAL NEED FOR PUBLIC SAFETY FUNDING**

FBIC faces a severe and increasing gap in law enforcement capacity, with funding that has only increased by \$100,000 since 1997, from \$1.2 million to \$1.3 million over 27 years. To adequately cover our 699,275-acre Reservation, FBIC requires at least \$5.194 million annually, yet we are currently forced to operate with only seven (7) patrol officers. This results in only two (2) officers on patrol at any time. This leaves our rural, remote community vulnerable to transnational drug cartels that exploit our rugged geography to introduce trafficking and violent crime.

The lack of resources also cripples our judicial and detention systems. While BIA is statutorily required to support tribal courts under 25 U.S.C. § 3611, we receive only \$336,000 of the \$850,000 needed to function effectively. This shortfall prevents the implementation of laws designed to keep our Reservation safe and limits our ability to provide rehabilitation. Due to staffing shortages at regional facilities, detainees on our Reservation are often shipped as far away as Oklahoma, 772 miles from their families and support networks.

The public safety crisis at FBIC is a symptom of continued neglect from the Federal government. The persistent failure to secure our community undermines the foundation of tribal self-determination. The Federal government must fulfill its most basic obligation to ensure that our family members and neighbors are secure in their own homes. Securing our homes is the first step, but the long-term resilience of FBIC depends on moving beyond crisis management toward a holistic system that nurtures our youth and strengthens our families.

### **INCREASED FUNDING NEEDED FOR THE TIWAHE PROGRAM AND OUR SOARING EAGLE JUVENILE JUSTICE PROGRAM**

The long-term resilience of FBIC is rooted in the health of the family and the next generation. BIA's Tiwahe program serves as the essential bridge between crisis intervention and generational healing. Tiwahe integrates social services, Indian child welfare, and poverty reduction to address the root causes of instability. This approach is grounded in our Aaniiih and Nakoda traditions, fostering a positive sense of identity and self-sufficiency. Through culturally grounded activities and individualized case management, we remove persistent barriers such as lack of transportation, engagement and unemployment. Our efforts demonstrate that establishing lasting community and cultural connections allows our families and youth to establish solid foundations that lead to true independence and resilience.

A vital component of this holistic effort is the Soaring Eagle Juvenile Justice Program, which was born from a need to support our youth beyond the limited scope of traditional grants. Developed in collaboration with our Elders' Council, Soaring Eagle focuses on reducing recidivism by addressing the underlying anger, grief, and abandonment that often lead to offending. Our

approach has been remarkably effective: in 2025, our six-month recidivism rate was only 34 percent, a figure that remains well below national levels. This success is driven by deep tribal collaboration, linking our youth court with chemical health services, law enforcement, and public schools to ensure interventions are tailored to the unique needs of each participant.

The success of the Soaring Eagle program demonstrates that when the FBIC is empowered to lead its own social and judicial systems, the results are transformative. Elders play a key role by sharing language and holistic healing practices, which has helped reduce our truancy list by half and improved student grades. However, these life-saving programs cannot operate on cultural resilience alone; they require a robust, permanent, and fully funded federal workforce to sustain them. To honor the trust responsibility, the Federal government must ensure that the agencies processing these contracts are fully staffed with dedicated specialists, ensuring the progress we have made in tribal well-being is never compromised.

### **INDIAN AFFAIRS NEEDS MORE STAFF AND RESOURCES**

The Administration's efforts to seek dramatic Reductions in Force in Indian Affairs programs across the Federal government are negatively impacting the United States' ability to fulfill its treaty and trust Responsibilities. Recent GAO data from January 2026 confirms an 11 percent net decrease in the Indian Affairs workforce since early 2025. This loss of over 800 employees, including half of all BIA Regional Director positions, creates a decision-making vacuum that impacts the daily operations of Tribal governments and the services we provide Tribal Members.

These reductions disproportionately target senior subject matter experts, forcing remaining staff to manage complex programs like dam safety and irrigation maintenance outside their areas of expertise. This loss of institutional knowledge causes significant delays and leaves essential programs, such as our understaffed law enforcement, without the technical and administrative support required for tribal program implementation and public safety. Recruitment remains stalled as long as BIA pay is uncompetitive and specialized positions remain vacant.

The Subcommittee must prevent the use of federal funding for further cuts and consolidation. Instead, the Subcommittee should increase funding for staff, resources, and technical expertise needed to manage complex government systems. The Subcommittee should also use its authority to empower regional and local BIA offices to make autonomous hiring and contracting decisions to ensure that personnel are directly accountable to the Tribes they serve.

### **CONCLUSION**

FBIC's appropriations requests are the essential components of the United States' treaty and trust responsibilities. From the funding of our Water Rights Settlement Act to the urgent need for public safety and Tiwahe funding, these programs are essential to the safety and future of the Aaniiih and Nakoda people. These initiatives depend on a stable federal workforce, and we cannot achieve true efficiency or community resilience while critical BIA positions remain vacant and institutional knowledge is hollowed out. We urge the Subcommittee to move past the decades of chronic underfunding and finally provide the funding needed by FBIC and as required in our Treaties and Agreements.