

BEAR RIVER BAND of the ROHNERVILLE RANCHERIA
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House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies
American Indian and Alaska Native Public
Witness Hearing

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Derek Bowman, and I serve as an elected Tribal Council Member for the Bear River Band of the Rohnerville Rancheria in Humboldt County, California. I come here before you in a good way.

I am here to speak about a critical appropriations issue affecting our Tribe and many others across Indian Country: the urgent need for sustained, equitable funding for Tribal law enforcement. This includes proposed legislation such as the Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act, BADGES for Native Communities Act, but mainly is focused of funding options that just don't exist.

Federal funding has, at times, helped Tribes establish or expand law enforcement programs. But most of these funding streams are competitive and short-term. They may help start a department — but they do not sustain one.

Public safety is not temporary. It is a permanent governmental responsibility.

Our Tribe struggles to recruit and retain qualified officers because we cannot compete with state and local jurisdictions on salary, retirement, and benefits. When neighboring agencies offer significantly higher compensation and long-term stability, Tribal departments become stepping stones instead of career destinations.

The result is high turnover, staffing instability, and difficulty maintaining experienced personnel. That instability affects response times. It affects investigative capacity. It affects officer morale. And most importantly, it affects the safety and trust of our community.

These challenges are intensified by California's status as a Public Law 280 state.

Under Public Law 280, criminal jurisdiction in Indian Country was transferred from the federal government to the state. In theory, this means state and local agencies share responsibility for public safety on Tribal lands. In practice, however, that shared responsibility often results in gaps.

In Humboldt County, Our Tribal communities frequently experience delayed responses and limited proactive presence. When jurisdiction is shared, accountability can become blurred. And when resources are stretched, Tribal lands are too often treated as secondary.

These gaps in public safety have real consequences. Across Indian Country, Tribal communities continue to face the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People. Too many Native families live with the pain of loved ones who have disappeared or been taken by violence. Limited law enforcement resources, jurisdictional confusion, and delayed responses can allow cases to go unresolved and families without answers. Strengthening Tribal law enforcement capacity is one of the most important steps we can take to improve investigations, response times, and coordination in these cases.

Yet despite this structure, the responsibility for protecting our citizens ultimately falls back on us.

It is important to recognize that public safety in Indian Country is also tied directly to the federal government's trust responsibility to Tribal Nations. Through treaties, federal law, and longstanding policy, the United States has a legal and moral obligation to protect Tribal sovereignty and support the safety and well-being of Tribal citizens. Ensuring that Tribal governments have the resources necessary to provide effective law enforcement is a core component of fulfilling that responsibility.

In a PL-280 state, the need for strong, well-funded Tribal law enforcement is not diminished — it is amplified. Without sustained appropriations that allow Tribes to build professional, stable departments capable of exercising concurrent jurisdiction, the structural gaps created by PL-280 remain unaddressed.

Tribal citizens deserve the same level of protection as any other community in this country.

I respectfully urge this Subcommittee to:

- Expand base Interior appropriations to support ongoing Tribal law enforcement operations — not just start-up programs
- Create funding mechanisms that allow Tribes to achieve parity in compensation and benefits with state and local agencies.
- Strengthen long-term, non-competitive funding streams that provide operational stability and officer retention.

Sustainable public safety funding is not discretionary in Indian Country — it is part of the federal trust responsibility.

I close with this: when a Tribal Member on our reservation calls Law Enforcement for help, they should never have to wonder whether help will come quickly — or whether their community is treated as less worthy of protection. Our people deserve safety not in theory, but in practice.

Thank you for your time and consideration.