



**THE COWLITZ INDIAN TRIBE
TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE WILLIAM (BILL) IYALL, CHAIRMAN**

**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES**

March 18, 2026

Summary of Agency/Program and Funding Requests

- 1. Indian Health Service and Tribal Healthcare Funding***
- 2. Tribal Public Safety and Law Enforcement Funding***
- 3. Funding for Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Roads***
- 4. Funding for Water Infrastructure (EPA & IHS)***

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Thank you Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to provide testimony for the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. The Cowlitz have lived in southwest Washington since time immemorial. After unsuccessful treaty negotiations in the 1850s, the federal government opened the Tribe's lands to non-Indian settlement through an Executive Order without congressional authorization. Our lands were lost and our people were scattered. No land was set aside for the Tribe despite repeated petitions to the federal government, and we came to be treated as terminated. Ultimately we were forced to go through the Department of the Interior's administrative recognition process to restore the government-to-government relationship, and acquire land to create our Reservation in Clark County, Washington.

Today, we have nearly 5,000 enrolled members. Our federal recognition and Reservation land base have allowed the Tribe to strengthen its governmental capacity to engage in self-determination and economic development, preserve our cultural traditions, and protect and provide for our members. Federal funding has been critical in these efforts. The Tribe is working to expand our land base and develop infrastructure to support our growth. The Tribe greatly appreciates the Subcommittee's commitment to providing Indian Country with much-needed funding and upholding the federal government's trust responsibility to tribes. The Tribe urges that the Subcommittee prioritize and increase federal funding for tribal healthcare, public safety, BIA roads, and tribal water infrastructure.

I. INDIAN HEALTH SERVICE (IHS) AND TRIBAL HEALTHCARE FUNDING

The Tribe compacts with IHS under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) to provide healthcare services at our four clinics in Vancouver, Longview, DuPont, and Tukwila, Washington. In addition, we operate a mobile health van to provide services for those unable to access traditional clinics. The Tribe is also working to extend healthcare to all its members across the country, regardless of their proximity to the Tribe's medical clinics.

The Forever People

Cowlitz clinics serve over 5,000 Native American patients each year. Our clinics provide basic healthcare services, health promotion/disease prevention, and a full continuum of behavioral health services including our recently-added opioid addiction treatment. We assist our Tribal members to access specialty services through our purchased and referred care program. The Tribe also plans to open a pharmacy in the last quarter of the fiscal year. The Tribe's ability to provide these services rests on continued funding for IHS and tribal health care programs, as well as an adequate federal health care workforce. This has become more apparent as we see an increase in people who have lost or cannot afford insurance who now must use tribal facilities. Discretionary appropriations for IHS are chronically underfunded and frequently fall far short of meeting healthcare needs, which leads to poor health and greater health disparities for Native Americans.

In January, IHS announced there is a “near-30 percent vacancy rate across the IHS,”¹ and IHS has launched its largest-ever hiring effort to combat these staffing deficits. The Tribe has concerns that IHS will not prioritize staffing to meet its obligation to support tribes that operate under ISDEAA compacts and contracts -- especially when over 65% of the agency's budget is transferred to tribes and tribal organizations through these agreements. The continued lack of adequate staffing in the Office of Tribal Self Governance has had a negative impact on the Tribe's ability to negotiate funding agreements and address contract support costs (CSC) and Section 105(j) issues. For example, the Tribe continues to wait for IHS approval of its program funding through its annual funding agreement (AFA). Adequate staffing is desperately needed to provide timely review and approval of AFAs to promote tribal self-governance, to provide technical assistance to tribes, and to operate and support tribal healthcare programs.

The Nation Tribal Budget Formulation workgroup recommends FY 2027 funding for IHS at a level of \$73 billion. At a minimum, we request that Congress fund IHS at levels significantly above FY 2026 levels (\$8.05 billion). We urge the Subcommittee to continue to provide advance appropriations for IHS, which helps to ensure that Tribal health care is not held hostage to the uncertainty of the annual federal appropriations process. Finally, we strongly support treating contract support costs and 105(j) lease payments as mandatory, not discretionary appropriations.

II. TRIBAL PUBLIC SAFETY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT FUNDING

The Cowlitz Tribe's Public Safety Department must patrol a large service area covering the Reservation and tribal properties outside the Reservation (stretching north to Toledo, about 50 miles away). Cowlitz also has a mutual aid agreement with Clark County, and provides law enforcement services to the neighboring cities of Ridgefield, La Center, and Woodland. As a result, Cowlitz Tribal Police are often the first on the scene. More funding to adequately staff and equip our Tribal Police is needed.

Our Tribal Police are stretched thin, making it difficult to adequately staff the dozens of events that our gaming facility holds every year, which can have up to 1,200 patrons for each event. Calls for service have increased every year, with 6,268 calls in 2025, an increase of 2,000 calls from the prior year. There is no space to house additional personnel to meet the growing need for law

¹ IHS Press Release, *Indian Health Service Launches Largest Hiring Effort in Agency History* (Jan. 29, 2026), available at https://www.ihs.gov/sites/newsroom/themes/responsive2017/display_objects/documents/pressrelease_01292026.pdf.

enforcement on the Reservation and in neighboring communities. The Tribe would like to hire additional officers to address the increased demand for public safety services, but the building currently being used to house the Public Safety Department is wholly inadequate and the current police vehicle fleet desperately needs upgrading.

The Cowlitz Public Safety Department operates out of two 17x44 foot modular trailers, which house nineteen Tribal officers and the Tribal Court. Tribal Police do not have office space, an adequate public access area, a detention processing area, or holding cells, making the trailers woefully inadequate to handle basic law enforcement responsibilities, like secure evidence storage. The Tribal Court and Legal Department have extremely limited space and personnel, which limits the number and type of cases they can handle. The police vehicles in our current fleet are heavily used and aging. Repair costs are quickly approaching or exceeding the value of the vehicles. Replacement of these vehicles and the purchase of new vehicles is needed to support the hiring of additional personnel to address the growing public safety needs.

Unfortunately, existing federal funding is entirely inadequate to meet the public safety and justice needs of Indian Country. According to a February 2024 BIA Report² to Congress under the Tribal Law and Order Act of 2010, the Tribal public safety and justice need in Indian Country in 2021 was \$3.509 billion – \$1.7 billion for law enforcement, \$284.2 million for existing detention and corrections programs, and \$1.5 billion for Tribal courts. BIA estimated that overall funding levels for BIA-administered tribal public safety and justice programs were *under* 13 percent of total need – meaning there was over \$3 billion in unmet need. That number continues to increase, yet annual appropriations are nowhere near this estimated need.

The Tribe strongly urges the Subcommittee to substantially increase federal funding for BIA and tribal law enforcement and facilities from current FY 2026 levels (\$771.84 million). More federal funding is desperately needed to even begin to address the public safety and tribal law enforcement needs facing Indian Country. Without additional funding, the Cowlitz Public Safety Department will struggle to fulfill its basic mission: to protect the Tribe and its members, integrating community policing and outreach to reduce crime and solve problems, and building trust and open communication with the community.

III. FUNDING FOR BIA ROADS

The Cowlitz Indian Tribe faces significant road safety issues on and surrounding its Reservation. The northwest portion of the Reservation currently lacks a safe, reliable, and congestion-free route for traffic. Significant traffic congestion and safety challenges also exist on roadways that connect local communities, the Tribe's Reservation lands, and Interstate 5, especially at Exit 16. Additional federal funding is needed to mitigate these traffic and safety challenges.

Specifically, the Tribe needs significantly more funding to facilitate tribal planning for construction projects that will alleviate traffic congestion and install necessary safety improvements. Funding is also needed to construct and improve roads within and providing access to the Tribe's

² Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services, Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021 (Feb. 2024), available at: https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/media_document/2021_tloa_report_final_508_compliant.pdf.

Reservation, particularly as the area continues to grow, and to support the Tribe's planned economic development initiatives, which cannot happen without improved infrastructure. The Tribe's Reservation is located in Clark County, which has added over 20,000 residents since 2020.³ According to the Washington State Department of Transportation, the I-5 exits to the Reservation have high Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) of approximately 3,500 entering the Reservation from I-5, approximately 10,000 leaving the Reservation from I-5, and approximately 76,000 going either direction from NW 319th Street.⁴ Significant road improvements and construction on the Reservation and on roadways that access the Reservation are needed to address this heavy traffic volume and related congestion and safety incidents.

The Tribe urges this Subcommittee to fund BIA roads at significantly higher levels than current FY 2026 levels (\$71.5 million). BIA roads have been underfunded for decades, and current funding levels are nowhere near what is needed to address the more than 29,000 miles of paved, gravel, and earth-surface roads in Indian Country. Additional roads funding is vital to mitigate the Tribe's traffic and safety challenges, and to support the Tribe's efforts to build its land base and develop more economic opportunities on the Reservation and in the surrounding community.

IV. INCREASED FUNDING FOR WATER INFRASTRUCTURE

Both IHS and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) play an important role in providing funding and support for tribal water and wastewater infrastructure. Tribes can receive federal funding for water infrastructure programs and underground injection control wells (UIC) under the EPA's State and Tribal Assistance Grants (STAG) programs. Tribes may also receive funding for sewer systems through the IHS Sanitation Facilities construction program.

The Tribe's ability to expand and engage in additional economic development on the Reservation is currently limited by its existing water and wastewater infrastructure. The Reservation is currently served by UIC wells and a wastewater treatment plant, but the treatment facility is nearing capacity, and new UIC wells will be needed to support additional growth. This system was developed because the Tribe initially was unable to connect to the La Center municipal sewer system due to Growth Management Plan deficiencies, at the time the Reservation was established. Since then, the State has enacted legislation that allows the Tribe to connect to the sewer system, and funding to support that effort would allow the Tribe to expand and grow and engage in economic development opportunities on the Reservation.

The Tribe urges this Subcommittee to fully fund the EPA STAG program and the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction program, at levels at least equal or greater than those provided in FY 2026. These programs are absolutely necessary for the Tribe's planned economic development and growth, which will benefit both the Tribe and the surrounding community.

³ Karlee Van De Venter, *Which counties in WA are growing the most? Here's what new Census data says*, Tri-City Herald (June 6, 2025), available at <https://www.tri-cityherald.com/news/state/washington/article307724980.html>.

⁴ See Washington State Department of Transportation, *WSDOT-Traffic Counts (AADT) Current for Route ID 005R101707; Route ID005S101631; and Route ID 005* (accessed Mar. 3, 2026), available at <https://geo.wa.gov/datasets/WSDOT::wsdot-traffic-counts-aadt-current/explore?location=45.851904%2C-122.700797%2C16>. Tribal data shows 10,740 vehicles daily using NW 31st Avenue, and 12,664 vehicles daily using Cowlitz Way to enter and exit the Reservation. Cowlitz Indian Tribe ADT Study (Jan. 2026).