

Testimony of Quintin Swanson, Chairman, Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearing
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
March 17-18, 2026

Recommendations:

1. Pass the TERRA Act (H.R.3654) to eliminate bureaucratic waste and streamline Tribes' ability to address natural disasters.
 2. Fortify Tribal disaster resilience and related programs, including those supporting Tribal community-driven relocation.
 3. Increase funding for the Army Corps of Engineers to restore the embankment protecting our reservation.
 4. Provide funding for the immediate dredging of the Tokeland Marina.
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Thank you, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to share our funding priorities for the FY 2027 federal budget. My name is Quintin Swanson, and I am the Chairman of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe. We are located on Washington State's Pacific Coast, 2,800 miles west-by-northwest of Washington, D.C., along the beautiful north shore of Willapa Bay.

As Tribal Chairman and lifelong resident of Tokeland, Washington, I have learned firsthand that vibrant and successful Tribal communities are not possible without attending to our natural resources and our people's health. I appreciate that the Subcommittee is responsible for these same priorities, and it is in that shared spirit of community responsibility that I speak to you today. The following testimony details Shoalwater's urgent efforts to move uphill, where we will be protected from the threat of tsunamis and other hazards, and reinforces the need for supporting Tribal natural disaster and community resilience programs.

We appreciate the Subcommittee's continuing steps to support Tribes facing natural disasters and related threats, such as recognizing in House Report 118-155 that some coastal Tribes "experience severe weather-related conditions that jeopardize public safety and health." We thank Chairman Simpson, Chairman Cole, and Representative Ellzey, in particular, for supporting the TERRA Act this Congress, legislation in which Shoalwater has been heavily invested.

We have been discouraged, however, by recent trends in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) appropriations, where programs like Road Maintenance and Tribal Community Resilience have been mostly flat-funded for several years. This amounts to a de facto cut given rising inflation. We call on this Subcommittee to ensure that Tribal programs are properly funded, and particularly to increase funding for Tribal disaster and community resilience programs in FY 2027.

Shoalwater's Upland Relocation Project

Tribal communities are uniquely impacted by natural disasters due to a deep connection to our ancestral homelands. For Shoalwater, a single tsunami event would take out the entire community: our homes, our government, our economic development opportunities, and what defines us as Shoalwater people. Meanwhile, our Reservation remains constantly under threat from slow-moving natural disasters. Our community and the surrounding area will soon be entirely underwater due to the relentless loss of 100–130 feet of coastline per year over the last century—about 2 miles of land to date—combined with the catalytic impact of intensifying winter storms.

For now, we are protected only by two earthen embankments constructed and maintained

by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). In 2022, USACE secured \$40 million through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to restore one of the embankments, an investment for which we are truly grateful. The other embankment, which is closer to our road, is in dire need of repair. This embankment must remain functional to protect our community. To that end, we are asking for additional investments in USACE as a short-term mitigation strategy towards our long-term goal of securing permanent safety for our people through relocation.

We cannot continue to rely on a failing embankment, and we see our current situation as an opportunity to rebuild the Shoalwater community more resilient than ever. A few years ago, we purchased 1,200 acres of higher-elevation land adjacent to our Reservation for the purpose of establishing a new community location that is safe from the threats we face. The land was completely raw and undeveloped, requiring attention to basic needs such as clearing trees, grading, and building access roads before any vertical development can begin. Shoalwater has been straining our Tribal reserves to plan and implement the early phases of this massive relocation project while maintaining the operation and delivery of essential services to our citizens.

Unfortunately, it is only going to get more difficult as we face a significant loss of gaming revenue. The Tribe's location and sparse geographic population have always presented a challenge when it comes to sustaining a gaming operation. Recent trends in machine gaming in Washington state, leading to loss of shared gaming revenue for remote Tribes like us, will only exacerbate our lack of resources to address the challenges we face as we move our community to safer ground. Now more than ever, we must turn to Congress and our federal partners to help us meet the challenges ahead.

Moving our community uphill involves substantial expenses for planning, design, and implementation of roads, utilities, housing, schools, clinics, and other community and government buildings. As part of its trust and treaty responsibility to protect our lands and people, the federal government is obligated to support these efforts. However, instead of ensuring the necessary resources are accessible, it has imposed layers of red tape that make programs difficult to navigate and implement. We have been very fortunate and grateful to gather federal support from the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), among other federal agencies. However, it has not been easy to access or use such resources efficiently when agencies have different award restrictions and require multiple, duplicative reports.

Aligning the timeline of funding can be a particular problem. For example, Shoalwater was awarded funding by DOT for road construction and by HUD for housing construction. Naturally, we need to build the road before we build the houses; otherwise, we have no way to get the housing supplies to the construction site. But the housing money was distributed immediately while the transportation money was delayed, leaving us in a bind. Because federal agencies operate on different timelines and fail to communicate, we were left sitting on a federal grant we couldn't use while inflation increased our costs, and the ever-present threat of a tsunami threatened to wipe our Reservation off the map.

Further, the resources we have been allocated are largely designated for the planning and early development phases of the upland relocation project. We will need more assistance to fully implement the project and protect our community. If we are unable to obtain the necessary resources to relocate our village, Shoalwater will face the highest cost any community can pay. As each day goes by, our Reservation is closer to destruction by a tsunami or vanishing beneath ocean waters. Federal resources will be essential to ensuring this does not happen.

The TERRA Act

We ask the Subcommittee to support the prompt passage of the bipartisan TERRA Act (H.R.3654), which has been reintroduced this Congress. This legislation is specifically designed to solve many of the problems Shoalwater has encountered in undertaking our upland relocation project. Modeled on the successful Public Law 102-477 program, the TERRA Act would create a hub in the Department of the Interior (DOI) to serve as a single point of contact for Tribes facing natural disasters and related threats, through which such Tribes could identify, access, and integrate existing federal resources into comprehensive plans tailored to their communities' needs.

Through a TERRA plan, all these integrated resources would reach the Tribe on the timeline agreed to by the Tribe and the agencies, while the interagency framework would foster relationships between the Tribe, DOI, and other federal agencies for effective implementation. The TERRA Act would cut through bureaucratic red tape by minimizing reporting requirements, eliminating redundancies, streamlining environmental reviews, and otherwise improving government efficiency so the Tribe could implement the integrated programs effectively. Because the TERRA Act simply maximizes existing federal resources, there are *no new appropriations* attached to the bill.

Without an interagency framework like this, the planning and implementation of our upland relocation project has been a long, drawn-out process that does not meet the urgency of the danger our community faces. We have spent years going from program to program, agency to agency, trying to string together resources. When we are successful, we must contend with burdensome reporting, competing administrative requirements, and inappropriate federal oversight. This requires a level of staff, time, and financial capacity that we simply do not have. We are burning through our own Tribal resources with no promise that our efforts will ever be enough to address the devastating natural disasters we face.

Our experience working with HUD and DOT is an example of the need for improving interagency coordination and efficiency. If we had a TERRA plan in place, the money we needed to build the road and the houses would have been consolidated into a single funding source that operated on one cohesive timeline. The time we wasted waiting for DOT would have been spent making real progress on our relocation, and we would have saved money on inflation-related costs.

Other similar inefficiencies with DOT's program for emergency road infrastructure would be solved with the TERRA Act. This funding will often not be released until an existing road completely fails. If that were to occur with State Route 105, which runs through our Reservation and is endangered by the same threats we face, our entire Tribal community would be cut off from our schools, banks, and closest grocery stores, and many Tribal employees will become isolated from their homes. Irreparable harm to the functioning of our Tribal government and the education of our children would result, as well as increased costs to fix the road. Such a restriction would be waived under the TERRA Act, allowing us to address State Route 105's vulnerabilities before complete destruction while saving money in the process.

This legislation casts a wide net, covering all manner of natural disaster threats and related community resilience needs faced by Tribal Nations throughout the United States, including but not limited to coastal and riverine erosion, tsunamis, wildfires, hurricanes, severe winter weather, extreme heat, droughts, floods, landslides, earthquakes, and tornadoes. It is also designed to meet Tribes where they are in addressing these dangers, from disaster preparedness, mitigation, and relief efforts to community-driven relocation. The TERRA Act has received widespread endorsement from Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations, including but not limited to the National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Health Board, United South and Eastern

Tribes, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Alaska Native Health Board, Alaska Federation of Natives, Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes, and Tribal Self-Governance.

The TERRA Act has earned strong bipartisan support in both the 118th and 119th Congresses. The importance of this legislation to all of Indian Country cannot be overstated. The federal government has a trust and treaty obligation to protect our lands and communities, including from the threat of natural disasters. Despite this, the federal government has set up many barriers to accessing the very resources we so desperately need. We urge the Members of the Subcommittee to uphold its obligations to Tribal Nations by signing onto the TERRA Act as a cosponsor, supporting efforts to move it through the House of Representatives, and seeing it through to full passage during the 119th Congress.

Dredging in the Tokeland Marina

Another issue that we want to bring to your attention today is the urgent need for dredging in the Tokeland Marina. The current condition has reached a critical point, impacting not only our Tribe, but also the broader community that relies on the marina for commerce, recreation, and cultural sustenance. Because a dredging permit was not secured last year, sediment has continued to accumulate, leaving the marina dangerously shallow. At low tide, many portions are completely impassable, stranding both commercial and recreational vessels. This has created a hazardous and economically damaging situation, as buyers, fishers, and oyster growers alike face severe restrictions on their ability to operate.

The Tribe is one of the largest employers in Pacific County, and our investments in aquaculture and economic development create ripple effects throughout the region. Our shellfish operations in the marina are valued at over \$1 million as they hold more than three million oysters at a time. Sediment accumulation now threatens our equipment and the oyster seed that forms the foundation of our local industry. The current situation is forcing us to run motors in shallow mud, risk equipment damage, reduce water quality, and jeopardize future harvests.

In addition to shellfish farming, two major seafood buyers and numerous fishing vessels operate out of the Tokeland Marina. Additionally, the marina is an essential access point for recreational users and sport fishers, who are vital to the economic health of Pacific County. The loss of dredging has threatened this year-round economic driver, and when the marina cannot function, the consequences ripple across our community to threaten every aspect of our lives.

Years ago, when a hole was punched in the protective rock jetty, sediment began to fill the marina at an accelerated rate. Unless addressed, this cycle will continue, requiring dredging every other year to ensure safe and reliable access. We ask for your support as we seek funding to acquire the essential infrastructure needed to immediately dredge the marina, restore passage, and protect our economic and cultural investments.

Conclusion

I thank you for your time and attention, and I invite you to come visit us at Shoalwater. Our doors are open and we look forward to sharing with you our continued strength and resilience as a sovereign Tribal Nation.