

**Testimony of Councilman Louie Ungaro
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe
Before the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, & Related Agencies
March 18, 2026**

Summary of Budget Requests:

- I. Bureau of Indian Education – Funding for School Construction
- II. Bureau of Indian Education – Funding for Culturally Rooted Educational Programming
- III. Environmental Protection Agency – Support Puget Sound Program

Introduction & Background

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Honorable Members of the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. My name is Louie Ungaro, and I have the privilege of serving on the Muckleshoot Tribal Council and chairing the Tribe’s School Commission. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The Muckleshoot Tribe was a signatory to both the Treaty of Medicine Creek of 1854 and the Treaty of Point Elliott of 1855, through which the Tribe expressly reserved the right to self-governance and the authority to regulate its resources and economic activity. These treaties are not historical artifacts; they are binding federal law that impose continuing obligations on the United States. The federal government’s trust responsibility requires not merely restraint from interference, but affirmative action to ensure that our treaty reserved rights remain meaningful and capable of exercise.

As this Subcommittee considers the Fiscal Year 2027 Interior Appropriations bill, the Muckleshoot Tribe respectfully offers the following recommendations to support Indian education and fisheries.

The Muckleshoot Tribe (“Tribe”) is committed to the success of our children through culturally appropriate education that will prepare them for the future. The Tribe operates the Muckleshoot Tribal School, which is a comprehensive Tribally Controlled School that works in conjunction with the Bureau of Indian Education (“BIE”) and the State of Washington as a Tribal Compact School to serve the needs of our community.

The school provides K-12 instruction for Native American students focusing on Common Core Standards while infusing Muckleshoot culture, practices, and history in our future generations. This intersection of modern learning and culture ensures that our children are able to branch out and compete in today’s economy while maintaining a strong connection to their Muckleshoot roots.

The Muckleshoot Tribal School (“MTS”) was constructed in 2009 as a world-class and state of the art campus. Enrollment has grown steadily each year and now serves 470 students. The Tribe,

the Education Commission, and school leadership have been aggressively working to increase our on-time graduation rate. The on-time graduation rate is based on a “cohort” of students that begin 9th grade together. I am proud to share that we have raised our on-time cohort graduation rate dramatically from 42.1% in 2017 to 75.7% for the 2024-2025 school year. While there is always more work to be done, we are incredibly encouraged by the progress of our students and the dedication of their teachers.

It is important to highlight the ways in which the Muckleshoot Tribal School’s leadership has worked to meet the needs of our students through the adoption of innovative education programs. These programs include:

- **Language & Cultural Instruction** – All elementary students receive language and culture instruction, and middle and high school students have the option to continue studying the Muckleshoot language. In addition, MTS has embedded Muckleshoot culture and language throughout our school and in our curriculum by: having bilingual signage and visual communications; drums circle; diet and nutrition that includes Indigenous foods, traditional cooking methods and horticulture; culture nights and potlach; and woodshops to teach traditional carving practices.
- **Environmental Education** – All children, Muckleshoot Children Development Center (MCDC) through high school, are immersed in an environmental education program on the 105,000 acre Tomanamus Forest. This program includes a partnership with Pacific Education Institute and Hancock Forest Management, which provides a high-quality professional development and consultation services for educators in equitable, locally relevant, career connected, outdoor STEM education to develop students into scientifically literate citizens, equipped to make balanced decisions for sustainable communities. Hancock Forest Management, the Tomanamus land and forest manager, provides the field experience in a variety of ways including field STEM education, summer environmental education, summer stewardship youth corps, and a variety of other STEM based education programs.
- **Special Services moving to an inclusive education model for students with an IEP** – The push-in (Inclusive) model brings the instruction and any necessary materials to the student. In contrast the Pull-out services typically happen in a setting outside the general education classroom. While the general education teacher is an important resource, they are rarely involved in pull-out services.
- **Kings for Success Program** – This after school program provides additional support in Math, Science, English/ELA, and Social/Emotional Learning. It will also provide enrichment activities and clubs such as Chess and STEM.
- **Student Leadership Development Programs** – MTS has developed and implemented a high school leadership class to compliment the two middle school leadership classes. These courses focus on communication, problem-solving, resource and meeting management, and community service. This helps students develop the leadership skills necessary for future professional and academic success.

- **AVID Course required for all 6th and 7th grade students** – AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is a college readiness program designed to help students develop the skills they need to be successful in college. The program places special emphasis on growing writing, critical thinking, teamwork, organization and reading skills.

Together, these programs ensure that MTS students receive the tools, skills, and education necessary to lead our people and future generations. However, federal partnership remains essential to sustaining and expanding these efforts.

I. Bureau of Indian Education – Funding for School Construction

As discussed above, the MTS was constructed in 2009 as a state-of-the-art facility for our students. The construction of the MTS was the result of years of advocacy by the Muckleshoot Tribe and Tribal Council. We were overjoyed when we finally secured the federal funding necessary to accomplish this for our children.

However, disagreements quickly emerged between the Tribe and the BIE regarding the appropriate size and capacity of the school. The BIE relied on the Tribe’s current population at the time of planning, which we knew would not adequately reflect the Tribe’s projected growth. That analysis failed to consider the significant increase in the population of pre-kindergarten age children and the Tribe’s overall growth rate. Unfortunately, the BIE did incorporate these projections and shortly after the school opened we reached, and soon exceeded, its capacity.

This situation will only become more difficult in the coming years. The Tribe’s ten-year age 5 to 18 (school age) student population projection is 1025 students representing a 54% increase over the current student population of 470. The MTS was built for a combined student and staff population of only a 468 maximum. So, the current student population – not even taking staff into account – is already overcapacity by 2 students.

We urge the Subcommittee to prioritize school construction funding so that Indian Country’s children can obtain a quality education in a safe environment. Further, the Tribe respectfully requests that the Subcommittee direct the BIE to reconsider how it determines the size of new school construction projects so that tribal population projections are properly incorporated.

II. Bureau of Indian Education – Funding for culturally rooted educational programming

The Muckleshoot Tribe believes it is essential that education be locally directed and culturally rooted. Ensuring that students have access to language and cultural resources throughout their education has proven successful at MTS and our students have a better grounding in their identity as Muckleshoot.

Programs funded through BIE's Education Program Enhancements help provide the necessary resources to meet the unique needs and local priorities of our Tribal School, including resources for our instructors to increase language proficiency, and prevent language loss. Projects supported by this account should be expanded so that more tribes are able to access their benefits. The Tribe requests that this Subcommittee continue to support increases to BIE's overall budget and support programs that include culture and language into the curriculum, and finally programs that encourage our students' interactions with the living world.

III. Environmental Protection Agency – Support Puget Sound Program

Many threats are placing the very survival of salmon in Puget Sound at risk. Puget Sound is the defining natural resource of our region and has been designated an estuary of National Significance under the Clean Water Act. For those of us who live in Western Washington, Puget Sound represents the promise of a clean, healthy, and vibrant environment. It is as central to our region as the Great Lakes are to the Midwest and the Everglades are to Florida. Protecting Puget Sound is not only an environmental responsibility, but also a commitment to the communities, cultures, and economies that depend on it.

For the Muckleshoot People, the decline of salmon is more than an environmental concern—it is a crisis for our people. Salmon are central to our treaty rights, our culture, and our identity. When salmon disappear, we lose more than a species. We lose the ability to pass down traditions, practices, and knowledge that have sustained our communities for generations. When salmon are healthy, our people are healthy. Our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being is inseparable from our rivers and from the salmon that return to them each year. The decline of salmon also threatens the broader ecosystem of Puget Sound. Southern Resident Killer Whales, which depend on salmon for survival, are now on the brink of extinction.

Through EPA's Puget Sound Program, the Muckleshoot Tribe receives essential federal support to conduct research and implement restoration aimed at rebuilding salmon populations. Salmon survival rates in Puget Sound are significantly lower than in nearby waters, and federal investment allows our scientists to investigate the causes and develop effective solutions.

The Muckleshoot Tribe respectfully urges the Subcommittee to increase funding for EPA's Puget Sound Program, which is critical to strengthening the research, restoration, and collaborative efforts necessary to protect Puget Sound and the communities that depend on it.

Conclusion

I appreciate the opportunity to bring the Muckleshoot Tribe's voice to this table today. We appreciate your continued commitment to tribal communities, Native education, and the protection of the natural resources that sustain our people.

We look forward to continuing to work with the Subcommittee to ensure that these priorities remain supported in the Fiscal Year 2027 appropriations process.