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June 4, 2025

The Honorable Tom Tiffany
Chairman, Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Tiffany:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Natural Resources regarding the FORESTS Act and Tribal Co-Management Legislation on May 20th, 2025. Enclosed, please find my responses to the additional questions for the record submitted following my testimony.

I greatly appreciate the Committee's attention to these critically important issues affecting tribal forestry, stewardship programs, and the ongoing efforts toward meaningful co-management. Should you or your staff require further clarification or additional information, please do not hesitate to contact my office.

Miigwech—thank you again for your consideration and support.

Respectfully Submitted,

Austin Lowes, Chairman

Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians

Additional Questions for the Record

Chairman Austin Lowes
Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands

Hearing Date: May 20, 2025
Response Date: June 04, 2025

1. How can increased co-management strengthen food sovereignty?

Co-management and the land stewardship that Tribes can pursue through co-management authorities is deeply connected to food sovereignty. From an Ojibwe perspective, that of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, food sovereignty involves tribal authority and control over tribal members' access to, and ecological and broader management of, our homelands and waters. Food sovereignty involves understanding and experiencing the cultural significance of food sources, methods of harvest, and the maintenance and adaptation of intergenerational relationships with the plants, animals, and other elder beings who have nourished us since time immemorial.

The Sault Tribe has the largest population among the federally recognized Tribes east of the Mississippi River, with over 53,000 members, yet we own less than 3,000 acres of forest land. Our membership values hunting, gathering, and fishing as means of providing for our families, ensuring physical nourishment and cultural wellness, and living mino-bimaadiziwin, a good Ojibwe life. The lack of tribally owned lands, however, means that our members rely on public lands, primarily National Forest lands, for subsistence hunting, fishing, and gathering. Our families depend on National Forests to gather leeks and hunt turkeys each spring, gather blueberries and other medicines each summer, and hunt grouse and deer each fall.

In 2012, we completed an Integrated Resource Management Planning (IRMP) Process, with a survey of our membership to understand member values and priorities for, and uses of, our shared natural resources (Lyu, Oh, & Vogt 2011). We employed a stratified sample design to gain insight into harvesting activities among general Sault Tribe members and Sault Tribe harvest license holders. Each year, we issue over 4,000 harvest licenses to our members to legally fish, hunt, and gather within the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory. Among Sault Tribe harvest license holders that responded to the IRMP Survey, over three-quarters (77.3%) hunted during the previous year. Among general members (utilizing non-tribal harvesting licenses), about half (45.6%) hunted in the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory during that same time. We also asked our members to report on meals eaten, including wild-harvested fish and game, as well as locations of harvesting. From this data, we estimate that Sault Tribe members harvest over one million meals per year from the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory, and more than half of our members rely on National Forests for subsistence.

In addition to this survey, we collect valuable information on tribal member harvesting trends through mandatory harvest reports. We use the findings from these harvest reports to inform our co-management priorities and guide us in directing tribal resources to National Forest land stewardship. We know that over half of our citizens rely on National Forests to hunt, fish, and gather, thus we continue to prioritize collaboration with the US Forest Service in pursuit of co-management that protects and enhances culturally important food species, habitats, membership access to those species and habitat, and broader ecosystem resilience. This work supports both our health and our sovereignty.

Co-management allows Tribes to lead land and species restoration activities and to prioritize species and habitats that federal plans may overlook. Our Ishkode Project with the Hiawatha National Forest offers a great example of the role Tribes can play in addressing important species and habitat considerations in federal management decision-making. Our joint Tribal-Federal Ishkode Plan draws from Ojibwe knowledge, values, and responsibilities to acknowledge the important relationships between prescribed fire, or fire on the land, and blueberries, grouse, Labrador tea, and other quintessential foods and medicines important to our Tribe and Ojibwe ways of life. We are able to acknowledge seasonal and

other cultural knowledge in this plan. Co-management would allow us to more fully engage Anishinaabe knowledge of harvest cycles and ecosystem relationships to guide prescribed and cultural fire. Incorporating Tribal burning practices can restore habitats critical to food species (e.g., blueberries, game browse areas).

Through co-management and drawing on intergenerational and local expertise, Tribes can help ensure that forestlands are managed for resilience and protected from incompatible uses. Tribes can help shape land use decisions that prevent extractive or disruptive uses in subsistence areas.

Forest planning processes are a primary means of co-management. By collaborating on updates to Forest Plans, Tribal priorities for subsistence species may be embedded in short- and long-term management. This is how we ensure continued access to traditional foods and food sovereignty. Monitoring and enforcement are also necessary means of co-management, which may support and enhance food sovereignty. Ongoing tribal access, harvesting relationships, and related presence on National Forestlands ensure local ecological conditions are monitored in culturally meaningful ways.

Importantly, Tribal co-management enables real-time responses to food system threats (e.g., disease, invasive species) and fulsome adaptive management.

Co-management as a means of enacting food sovereignty is limited by a lack of baseline data on ecological communities, subsistence species occurrence, and ecosystem dynamics, as well as sustained tribal access to National Forestlands as co-managed areas. The Sault Tribe has been dedicated to addressing these data gaps and restoring and promoting tribal community access to our local National Forestlands. These are long-term endeavors that require active engagement among tribal and federal managers.

Co-management requires shared decision-making authority, not just tribal participation in federal systems, with real investment of resources to enable and implement the work. Infrastructure and funding for monitoring, habitat work, intergenerational transfer of harvesting knowledge, and data sovereignty are all vital in realizing tribal food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is inextricably linked to land sovereignty. Co-management, when fully realized, strengthens both. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has been, and remains, dedicated to pursuing co-management of National Forestlands within the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory, as a means of food sovereignty, maintaining our Ojibwe ways of life, and as a responsibility to the plant, animal, and other relatives who have nourished us since time immemorial.

2. Can you speak to the need for sustained, reliable funding for Tribes to continue co-management and forestry work?

The critical need for sustained reliable funding to support Tribes in continuing their co-management and forestry work cannot be overstated. Current Tribal forestry program funding structures are primarily grant-based, highly fragmented, and unpredictable. The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe, for example, since 2012 has creatively and diligently acquired over 20 separate grants to build the necessary capacity for co-stewardship initiatives, and we have invested millions of dollars on national forestlands in the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory. Each federal dollar invested in this work is amplified by Tribal contributions—both monetary and in-kind—but this funding model remains fragile and precarious.

Without reliable and consistent funding, significant adverse impacts occur. Tribal agencies frequently face staffing shortages, as they struggle to retain experienced personnel without stable financial resources. Moreover, delays in funding—even after the execution of signed SF-424 agreements—cause substantial project stalls, undermine trust, and disrupt momentum. Because funding streams are braided together from multiple sources, the loss or delay of even a single grant creates exponential adverse effects across entire forestry programs, ultimately leading to a critical erosion of institutional knowledge and repeated setbacks in strategic planning.

Additionally, the narrow interpretation by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) of its trust responsibilities regarding forest management, limiting its support primarily to trust lands, presents another significant impediment. Tribes, such as the Sault Tribe, which possess minimal land bases, require broader BIA support to effectively manage and steward lands beyond their immediate trust holdings.

Moreover, there is a critical need for investment in both technical capacity and administrative support for Tribes. While the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) employs dedicated staff specifically for managing agreements, finances, and administrative workloads, Tribal staff often manage grants, agreements, and financial duties simultaneously with technical forest management responsibilities. This leads to overwhelming workloads and undermines the efficiency of co-management, as USFS co-management tasks become just one of many responsibilities tribal staff must juggle.

The innovative and collaborative approach of the Sault Tribe and the USFS in co-management has garnered national recognition, notably receiving the prestigious Chief's Rise to the Future Award. This honor highlights our achievements in collaborative forest stewardship and underscores the effectiveness of our forward-thinking partnership. Through this groundbreaking cooperative approach, the Tribe and USFS have advanced the stewardship of natural resources, co-developed processes for improved forest resilience and preserved ecological diversity and will provide lasting benefits to both human and natural communities.

Effective co-management requires recognition as an enduring relationship among governments, rather than a short-term, project-based initiative. Tribal-federal partnerships depend on stability and predictability to foster long-term trust, capacity building, and meaningful stewardship outcomes. Indigenous leadership in forest management directly supports national goals by enhancing the ability of landscapes to withstand environmental pressures, reducing the risks associated with catastrophic wildfires, and fostering the sustainability of diverse natural ecosystems.

To address these issues comprehensively, several key policy changes must be considered. Foremost, establishing recurring base funding for Tribal forestry and stewardship programs will ensure foundational stability. Additionally, expanding Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) authority to allow for contracts and compacts explicitly tailored to forest management will empower Tribes in meaningful governance. We need flexible funding for management of off-reservation forest lands and investing in robust workforce development initiatives that are also essential strategies for long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, true co-management and stewardship cannot sustainably operate on unstable, fragmented funding. Federal investment in Tribal forestry programs must be viewed not as charitable assistance but as a shared fiduciary responsibility rooted in treaty obligations and collective stewardship

of public lands. The funding provided through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) was a valuable initial step; however, it merely achieved parity with the substantial resources already committed by the Sault Tribe. The Sault Tribe's Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA) agreement provides essential early consultation authorities, yet without sustained and reliable federal funding, such authorities lose their intended effectiveness. Considering the significant scope of the Tribe's treaty-retained rights over all national forests within the 1836 Treaty Ceded Territory, which are much more extensive than the east zone of the Hiawatha National Forest, sustained and adequate federal funding is imperative to fully realize the potential and responsibilities inherent in Tribal co-management and stewardship efforts.