

Testimony of Cody Desautel
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&
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Before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indigenous People of the United States

Hearing on “Strengthening Indigenous Communities Through Cultural and Environmental Preservation”

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Thank you for asking the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) to provide input on how tribes address environmental protection in our forest management. Established in 1976, the ITC is a nonprofit nation-wide consortium of Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and individuals dedicated to improving the management of natural resources for Native American communities.

Indian Forest Management

On a total of 334 reservations in 36 states, 18.6 million acres of forests and woodlands are held in trust by the United States and managed for the benefit of Indian people. Pursuant to both tribal direction and federal law, our forests must be sustainably managed.

Tribal forests must meet - and often exceed - the same goals as other federal lands -- while subject to the same federal regulations, such as the National Environmental Policy Act and Endangered Species Act. In spite of these regulatory challenges Tribes are able to manage our lands with a balanced approach, because we live with the benefits and consequences of our actions. For tribal people, **environmental preservation is cultural preservation.**

Tribes operate modern, innovative and comprehensive natural resource programs premised on connectedness to the land, the resources, and the people. Our approach is holistic, striving to simultaneously sustain economic, ecological, and cultural values, the so-called “triple bottom line.” The active management tribes employ to realize the “triple bottom line” is facilitated by three elements:

- Our forests are held in federal trust for the use and benefit of our tribes and their members, and are guided by the management direction from our tribal governments in a manner consistent with the federal governments trust responsibility,

- The federal law guiding BIA and tribal management of these trust forests, the National Indian Forest Resource Management Act of 1990 (PL 101-630, Title III), is the most recent and most flexible federal forest management statute,
- and, The Indian Self-Determination Act (PL 93-638) has empowered tribes to assume direct and comprehensive control over the management of our forests.

Balancing use and values

The challenge before tribes today is balancing natural resource management actions that reflect the social, cultural, economic, and natural resource values of the tribal people in the face of changing climate and disturbance regimes. To maintain tribal cultures the tribal membership must have access to places and resources that define that culture. This is why Indian forests are one of the greatest resources tribes have. Balancing those interests is not simple, but tribes are successfully doing so by recognizing and respecting natural processes both spatially and through time.

Accomplishment of forest management goals is not optional. In addition to the cultural and environmental benefits, forest management activities provide jobs to the local community and revenue to support tribal services. My tribal leadership relies on those funds to pay for the basic needs of the tribal people, such as education, law enforcement, and employment.

Economic opportunity and employment, and access to basic human services on the reservation are critical for tribes. Without these things we will continue to see our people move away from our homelands, making it even harder to maintain those spiritual and cultural connections.

Outcomes

Unlike Forest Service and BLM forests, Indian forests and their management are reviewed by an independent scientific panel every ten years. In 2013, the Indian Forest Management Assessment Team (IFMAT) released its third report to Congress since 1994.

The 2013 IFMAT report shows that Tribes are suffering from chronic underfunding and challenges created by the loss of leadership and staffing. Yet it also shows significant progress being made on tribal forests. One of the report's key findings is that Tribes are able to accomplish more in their forests with far less funding than other federal land managers. On a per acre basis, tribes receive about one-third the funding for forest and wildfire management compared to the Forest Service.

Risks

Despite our best efforts to protect of our resources, wildfire poses an increasing risk to our values. The current model has been unsuccessful, and the only way to truly turn the

tide is to invest in staffing and accomplishments at a pace and scale that restores natural processes. This is clearly a huge task, but a fight tribes must win to preserve the small remnants of their traditional territory that exist as reservations today. As I stated above, without environmental preservation tribes will struggle with cultural preservation.

Even when we do everything right, fires from adjacent federal lands continue to threaten tribal forests. The ITC appreciates congressional authorities such as the Tribal Forest Protection Act and Good Neighbor Authority that allow tribes to do restoration work on nearby federal lands, where many tribes also exercise treaty hunting, fishing and gathering rights.

In the age of fire, I see forest management as a tool of conservation and protection. It might be our most important tool.