



YUROK ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

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**Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
1334 Longworth House Office Building**

*Hearing Entitled “Economic Diversification to Create Prosperous Tribal Economies”
February 15, 2024*

Questions from Rep. Westerman for Mr. Raymond Bacon, Executive Director, Yurok Economic Development Corporation

1. In your written testimony, you mentioned the various partnerships tribes can form with outside businesses, government agencies and nonprofits. Could you please elaborate on the partnerships that Yurok has?

Answer: The Yurok Tribe greatly values the external partnerships it has developed over the years with governments and private organizations. Some of our most recent partnerships have included working with government agencies such as the Economic Development Administration (EDA), the Treasury Department, and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. We have also leveraged many private partnerships, such as with CalFresh and others. Each partnership has benefited the tribe and tribal members in its own way, and we continue looking for ways to engage and further develop these external relationships and others.

Last fall, the tribal Economic Development Corporation collaborated with the EDA to fund and create an \$8 million fuel mart. The fuel mart is located in Orick, California, right in the heart of Yurok ancestral lands. We are proud of this project and its dual significance. That is, the fuel mart will serve as a vital revenue-generating venture for the tribe, and, by acquiring fee-to-trust status for the land upon which the development sits, we can offer fuel to our community at a lower cost, leveraging our exempt status and sovereignty to save our members money.

The Yurok Tribe also secured State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSBCI) funding through the Treasury Department for our Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) program. The CDFI was initially created to help our government address tribal entities’ and members’ historically low levels of access to financial services, and the SSBCI funding has been helpful as the tribe works to realize this goal. That said, while the program has proven successful, its impact was limited by our fledgling lending capacity in the finance sector coupled with the program’s requirement for match funding.

Despite the evident need for expanded resources, acquiring matching funds posed a formidable challenge due to the tribe's restricted discretionary budget.

Additionally, as I mentioned in my written testimony, our tribe worked with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration through the Department of Commerce to deploy broadband services to thousands of homes and has partnered with CalFresh to help increase food storage and food security on our reservation.

These are just some of the partnerships the tribe has been fortunate enough to successfully leverage in recent years to both grow and develop the tribe as well as improve the quality of life for tribal members. We are pleased with the results thus far and look forward to continuing to leverage public and private partnerships.

2. In your experience, what is the difficulty level for tribes to identify and access federal economic developmental programs, and how could Congress alleviate any issues?

Answer: We are aware of, and have been pleased to participate in, several federally sponsored economic development programs. However, in my experience, tribes generally encounter a high level of difficulty with identifying and accessing available resources. On a scale of 1 to 10, I would rank the difficulty of navigating these federal economic developmental programs as an 8.

Several factors contribute to these hardships. First, there is a strong need for community development and knowledge of government opportunities for Indian Country. At times, we lack experience on the tribal side that unnecessarily prevents, or delays, access to economic development programs and funding.

However, even when the tribe has the appropriate experience and resources for navigating application processes, requirements for certain programs often prove to be too cumbersome. For example, some programs require matching funds similar to the SSBCI example mentioned above. Match requirements overly burden the tribe's budget and limit the positive economic impact that well-intentioned programs can make. Most tribes are not casino tribes, and thus they lack plentiful discretionary funding. Accordingly, in the majority of cases, it is challenging for the tribe to provide the necessary match.

Congress can help address these issues by simplifying and excluding harmful requirements and through offering additional training to native tribes to assist with navigating federal government program applications for accessing economic development dollars. The government should also think of ways to work with tribes to address accessibility to housing for the professionals and talent we wish to attract. While, at times, our tribe may receive proper training or have trainers come to our area to help develop our staff and community, we continue to lack adequate housing for those professionals which we rely on for identifying and navigating government opportunities.