

**Hearing Before the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs**

**Hearing on Economic Diversification to Create Prosperous
Tribal Economies**

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**Testimony of Raymond Bacon
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I. Introduction

Chairman Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Yurok Tribe's Economic Development Corporation.

My name is Raymond Bacon. I am an enrolled member of the Yurok Tribe. I have served as Director of the Economic Development Corporation for 4 years and have worked in the tribal gaming industry for approximately 30 years.

Economic diversification is critical for developing prosperous tribal economies. Through strategic investments, tribal communities can leverage our unique cultural heritage, natural resources, and local expertise to explore new industries such as eco-tourism, renewable energy, and fisheries.

II. Prioritizing Economic Diversification Has Broad Positive Impacts On Tribal Communities And Their Neighbors

By prioritizing infrastructure and entrepreneurial initiatives, tribes can attract outside investment while simultaneously preserving our cultural identity and environmental integrity. This diversification not only reduces reliance on volatile industries but also creates employment opportunities and stimulates local economic growth, thereby empowering tribal communities to achieve greater self-sufficiency and resilience against economic downturns.

Moreover, economic diversification in tribal economies stimulates intergenerational wealth accumulation and promotes social cohesion within communities. By developing a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship, tribes can empower our youth to explore new career paths and contribute to the sustainable development of our ancestral lands. Education and vocational training programs tailored to local needs and opportunities can equip tribal members with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in emerging industries.

Partnerships with government agencies, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations can help provide tribes with access to technical assistance, funding, and market opportunities. Through these collaborative efforts and strategic planning, our tribal economies can focus on creating long-term prosperity and well-being for future generations.

Additionally, the benefits resulting from diversification efforts transcend the reservation and allows for positive economic impact to snowball into local economies. For example, our Tribe's economic feats have allowed for additional spending in the local communities of Del Norte and Humboldt counties. So, not only is diversification a financially prudent agenda for the tribe, but it also allows us to be good neighbors to adjacent communities as well.

III. The Yurok Tribe Has Benefited Greatly From Diversification Efforts

I would like to offer a few examples of the benefits diversification offers my own Tribe, to help demonstrate the opportunities that are unlocked when tribes pursue diverse economic strategies and initiatives. As California's largest Native American Tribe, we have been diligent in creating and operating thirteen businesses with four sister corporations to provide our people with several revenue sources. The success of earlier investments, such as with our brewery, has allowed the tribe to pivot to other economic development projects. So, I have first-hand knowledge of the benefits that a diverse tribal economy can bring.

Recently, we have expanded our business operations to diversify even further. These new initiatives include a golf course, LiDAR mapping (Yurok Aviation), and, notably, our fuel mart division. The fuel mart division is a prime example of how we successfully partner with other agencies and entities to accomplish important shared goals. Our fuel mart will enhance economic development with support from EDA funding. The realization of an \$8 million fuel mart travel center in the heart of Yurok ancestral territory not only demonstrates our commitment to economic growth but also emphasizes our dedication to preserving and revitalizing our ancestral lands.

This venture provides essential services for our community and travelers while also creating jobs and generating revenue. It sets the stage for further economic development initiatives, showcasing the potential for sustainable growth within indigenous territories. The success of this endeavor underscores the importance of strategic partnerships and funding support from organizations like the EDA in achieving our goals.

Additionally, I should highlight the ongoing efforts of the Yurok Telecommunications Corporation in significantly expanding broadband accessibility in the region. Through leveraging support from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, we are working to deploy 62 miles of middle-mile fiber optic cable from Orrick to Crescent City. This represents one of the largest technological advancements in the region, as we expect the project to bring high speed broadband to nearly 1,000 homes, 110 businesses, and 18 anchor institutions. This groundbreaking project is a testament to our tribe's historical endeavor, made possible through strategic partnerships and our tribe's economic stability and sophistication.

IV. The Tribe Continues To Leverage Eco-Tourism

Another exciting development for the Corporation has been the success of our investments in developing our eco-tourism infrastructure. Eco-tourism can be a way for indigenous communities to showcase their culture, traditions, and natural resources to visitors while promoting conservation and sustainable practices.

In Yurok Country, our visitor center serves as a hub and platform to educate visitors on Yurok culture, affirming our presence in our ancestral territory. And again, our partnership with the federal government played an important role in the success of that initiative: our center received direct funding from the scenic byways program.

On average, thousands of travelers pass through our visitor center each year, providing us with a unique opportunity to educate them about Yurok Country. Additionally, we've established a business allowing visitors to take a journey back in time in a traditional redwood dugout canoe. This immersive experience offers guests a firsthand look at our cultural heritage and deep connection to the Klamath River, while also promoting eco-tourism.

V. Renewable Energy And The Environment Are Integral To The Tribe's Economic Strategy And Cultural Identity

In addition to sharing our heritage and lands through eco-tourism, harnessing our natural resources into renewable energy also plays a significant role in supporting economic diversification for many tribes. Effectively utilizing wind, solar, and hydropower is both environmentally friendly and a source of positive economic development. The Yurok Tribe has recently partnered with Cal Fresh to install solar energy systems for enhancing food storage capacity in the upper region of our reservation.

Beyond embracing renewable energy sources, tribes can also continue to leverage their fish and wildlife to encourage sustainability and self-sufficiency. For example, salmon from the Klamath River has long been a vital subsistence resource for the Yurok Tribe, serving as a primary food source and holding significant cultural importance. Ensuring ongoing access to salmon and preserving the Klamath River are essential components of our tribe's diversification efforts. We are proud of our Tribe's long history as experts in river restoration, and due to the decline in salmon populations in our waterways, we have trained our focus and significant resources on the Yurok Construction Corporation to conduct vital restoration work on the Sacramento and Klamath rivers and Redwood Creek. For these reasons, maintaining access to Klamath River salmon remains pivotal to our diversification endeavors.

VI. Conclusion

Tribes need economies that can quickly adapt to ever-changing economic conditions, sustain and employ their communities, and help preserve their people's cultural identities. Reliance on one, or few, industries can undermine tribal economic health and unnecessarily leave tribes vulnerable to external market fluctuations and stressors. In focusing on building diverse tribal economies, we

can create a resilient foundation that can weather the otherwise turbulent impact of single market failures and foster sustainable growth for the future of our native communities.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.