

**Testimony of Quintin Swanson, Chairman, Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe
Hearing on the Tribal Emergency Response Resources Act (TERRA Act)**

House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
September 9, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernández, and Members of the Subcommittee, for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of the swift passage of the Tribal Emergency Response Resources Act (TERRA Act), H.R. 3654, to eliminate bureaucratic waste and streamline Tribes' ability to address natural disasters.

My name is Quintin Swanson, and I am the Chairman of the Shoalwater Bay Indian Tribe. We are located on Washington State's Pacific Coast, 2,800 miles northwest of Washington, D.C., along the beautiful north shore of Willapa Bay.

As Tribal Chairman and lifelong resident of Tokeland, Washington, I have learned firsthand that vibrant and successful Tribal communities are not possible without attending to our lands and natural resources. I appreciate that the Subcommittee is responsible for overseeing the trust and treaty obligations the federal government has to Tribal Nations, and it is in recognition of our government-to-government partnership that I speak to you today. The following testimony details the Shoalwater Tribe's urgent efforts to relocate our entire community. Our current Reservation is located at sea level, where it is sinking into the ocean as we face persistent coastal erosion and the threat of tsunamis. When we move uphill, our Tribe will be protected from these hazards, but we need your support to ensure our relocation project is completed with the immediacy it deserves.

The TERRA Act is an urgently needed measure that would support the many Tribes across the country like us that are facing natural disasters and related threats. We are grateful that the Subcommittee recognizes the importance of this legislation by holding a hearing. We urge the Members of the Subcommittee to support the enactment of the TERRA Act to fortify Tribal disaster resilience and related programs, including our community-driven relocation.

Shoalwater's Upland Relocation Project

Tribal communities are uniquely impacted by natural disasters due to a deep connection to our ancestral homelands. Instability threatens our people, our land, and our culture. For Shoalwater, a single tsunami event would take out the entire community—our homes, our government, our economic development opportunities, and what defines us as Shoalwater people. Meanwhile, our Reservation remains constantly under threat from slow-moving natural disasters. Our community and the surrounding area will soon be entirely underwater due to the relentless loss of 100–130 feet of coastline per year over the last century—about 2 miles of land to date—combined with the catalytic impact of intensifying winter storms. For now, we are protected only by an earthen embankment constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which requires high-cost maintenance and regular rebuilding. This is not a long-term solution.

Yet, the challenges we face are also an opportunity to rebuild the Shoalwater community more resilient than ever. A few years ago, we purchased 1,200 acres of higher-elevation land adjacent to our Reservation for the purpose of establishing a new community location that is safe from the threats we face. The land was completely raw and undeveloped, requiring attention to basic needs such as clearing trees, grading, and building access roads before any vertical

development can begin. Shoalwater has been straining our Tribal reserves to plan and implement the early phases of this massive relocation project while maintaining the operation and delivery of essential services to our citizens.

Moving our community uphill involves substantial expenses for planning, design, and implementation of roads, utilities, housing, schools, clinics, and other community and government buildings. As part of its trust and treaty responsibility to protect our lands and people, the federal government is obligated to support these efforts. However, instead of ensuring the necessary resources are accessible, it has implemented layers of red tape that make programs difficult to navigate and implement. We have been very fortunate and grateful to gather federal support from the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), among other federal agencies. However, it has not been easy to access or use such resources efficiently when agencies have different award restrictions and require multiple, duplicative reports.

Aligning the timeline of funding can be a particular problem. For example, a few years ago, Shoalwater was awarded funding by DOT for road construction and by HUD for housing construction. Naturally, we need to build the road before we build the houses; otherwise, we have no way to get the housing supplies to the construction site. But the housing money was distributed immediately while the transportation money was delayed, leaving us in a bind. Because federal agencies operate on different timelines and fail to communicate, we were left sitting on a federal grant we couldn't use while inflation increased our costs and the ever-present threat of a tsunami threatened to wipe our reservation off the map.

Further, the resources we have been allocated are largely designated for the planning and early development phases of the upland relocation project. We will need more assistance to fully implement the project and protect our community. If we are unable to obtain the necessary resources to relocate our village, Shoalwater will face the highest cost any community can pay—as each day goes by, our Reservation is closer to destruction by tsunami or vanishing beneath ocean waters. Federal resources will be essential to ensuring this does not happen.

The TERRA Act

We ask the Subcommittee to promptly consider and approve of the bipartisan TERRA Act (H.R.3654, 119th Congress). This legislation is specifically designed to solve many of the problems Shoalwater has encountered in undertaking our upland relocation project. Modeled on the successful Public Law 102-477 program, the TERRA Act would create a hub in the Department of the Interior (DOI) to serve as a single point of contact for Tribes facing natural disasters and related threats, through which such Tribes could identify, access, and integrate existing federal resources into comprehensive plans tailored to their communities' needs.

Through these comprehensive plans, all the integrated resources can reach the Tribe at the times agreed to by the Tribe and the agencies, while the interagency framework fosters relationships between the Tribe, DOI, and other federal agencies for effective implementation. This legislation cuts through bureaucratic red tape by minimizing reporting requirements, eliminating redundancies, streamlining environmental reviews, and otherwise improving government efficiency so the Tribe can implement the integrated programs effectively. Because the TERRA Act simply maximizes existing federal resources, there are ***no new appropriations*** attached to the bill.

Without an interagency framework like this, the planning and implementation of our upland relocation project has been a long, drawn-out process that does not meet the urgency of the danger our community faces. We have spent years going from program to program, agency to agency, trying to string together resources. When we are successful, we must contend with burdensome reporting, competing administrative requirements, and inappropriate federal oversight. This requires a level of staff, time, and financial capacity that we simply do not have. We are burning through our own Tribal resources with no promise that our efforts will ever be enough to address the devastating natural disasters we face.

Shoalwater's experience working with HUD and DOT provides an example of the need for improving interagency coordination and efficiency. If we had a TERRA plan in place, the money we needed to build the road and the houses would have been consolidated into a single funding source that operated on one, cohesive timeline. The time we wasted waiting for DOT would've been spent making real progress on our upland relocation project, and we would've saved money on inflation related costs.

Other similar inefficiencies with DOT's program for emergency road infrastructure would be solved with the TERRA Act. This funding will often not be released until an existing road completely fails. If that were to occur with State Route 105, which runs through our Reservation and is endangered by the same threats we face, our entire Tribal community will be cut off from our schools, banks, and closest grocery stores, and many Tribal employees will become isolated from their homes. Irreparable harm to the functioning of our Tribal government and the education of our children will result, as well as increased costs to fix the road. Such a restriction would be waived under the TERRA Act, allowing us to address State Route 105's vulnerabilities before complete destruction while saving money in the process.

This legislation casts a wide net, covering all manner of natural disaster threats and related community resilience needs faced by Tribal Nations throughout the United States, including but not limited to, coastal and riverine erosion, tsunamis, wildfires, hurricanes, severe winter weather, extreme heat, droughts, floods, landslides, earthquakes, and tornadoes. It is also designed to meet Tribes where they are in addressing these dangers, from disaster preparedness, mitigation, and relief efforts to community-driven relocation. It has received widespread endorsement from Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations, including, but not limited to, the National Congress of American Indians, National Indian Health Board, United South and Eastern Tribes, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Alaska Native Health Board, Alaska Federation of Natives, Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes, and the Self-Governance Communication and Education Tribal Consortium.

The TERRA Act earned strong bipartisan support in both the 118th and 119th Congress. The importance of this legislation to all of Indian Country cannot be overstated. The federal government has a trust and treaty obligation to protect our lands and communities, including from the threat of natural disasters. Despite this, the federal government has set up many barriers to accessing the very resources we so desperately need. We urge the Members of the Subcommittee to uphold its obligations to Tribal Nations by signing onto the TERRA Act as a cosponsor, supporting efforts to move it through this Committee, and seeing it through to full passage during the 119th Congress.

Conclusion

I thank you for your time and attention, and I invite you to come visit us at Shoalwater. Our doors are open and we look forward to sharing with you our continued strength and resilience as a sovereign Tribal Nation.