

Questions for Mr. Ervin Carlson, President, Intertribal Buffalo Council, Rapid City, South Dakota [H.R. 7954]

1. Lead Up: The Intertribal Buffalo Council, or I-T-B-C, has been in existence since the early 90s, starting with only 10 tribes, and now has over 90 member tribes.

Question: What factors are attributed to this continued growth of I-T-B-C?

*Mr. Chairman, there is a simple answer. For many tribes, and Indian people, the buffalo was simply one of the most important things in their lives. It provided everything and then within a very short period, and at no fault of ours, the buffalo were gone. Indian tribes want buffalo back on their lands and that is the mission of the ITBC. The increase in our membership is directly correlated to this goal of so many tribes. ITBC can help return buffalo to Indian country and provide technical assistance to those tribes. That is why our membership has increased so dramatically.*

Follow-up: For tribes that are part of I-T-B-C, what are the biggest roadblocks they face when looking to start or expand tribal buffalo herds?

*Beyond simply obtaining the buffalo and having a means of transporting them to their reservations, the remaining roadblocks are having the land and fencing, supplemental feed if needed, a source of water and some training in buffalo management.*

Follow-up: How will H.R. 7954 address those roadblocks?

*Certainly, some roadblocks will remain but the bill states that one of its purposes is to fulfill the government-to-government relationship with tribes in the management of buffalo and buffalo habitat and to assist tribes to protect, conserve and enhance buffalo herds. Between future funding and the technical assistance that ITBC provides to tribes as well as the transfer of surplus buffalo referenced in Section 7 that we can access and deliver to those tribes, we believe a number of roadblocks can be addressed and overcome.*

2. Question: How would the passage of H.R. 7954 expand the scope of the work the Intertribal Buffalo Council is able to accomplish?

*The bill may not necessarily expand the scope of our work, but it sanctions it and in Section 5 directs the Secretary to consult tribes and tribal organizations like ours on buffalo policy and on goals and objectives to help implement the bill. Those action will assist ITBC in implementing our directives from tribes.*

3. Question: What is the cultural significance of the buffalo for Indian tribes?

*The significance is almost beyond description. Many tribes refer to the buffalo as “our relative.” No other single animal or object sustained us for thousands of years as the buffalo did.*

4. Question: Mr. Carlson, could you speak to the impact on your tribe and across Indian Country when the buffalo was nearing extinction?

*The impact was simply devastating. Imagine losing the source of your clothing, your shelter, your tools, your principal source of protein. We used every part of the buffalo to sustain us. There is a direct correlation between the buffalo disappearing and the huge decline in the numbers of Indians in this county.*

Follow-up: Could you speak to the response I-T-B-C sees when tribes who have not had a buffalo on their lands for over a century watch a truckload of buffalo enter a fenced pasture and return to their lands?

*I and other members of my board and staff have witnessed the delivery of a truck load of buffalo to tribes that have not seen one in over a century. There are often crowds who gather and as the back gate of the truck opens and the buffalo charge out, many people start to cry. In one instance a very old woman started singing a song that no one had heard before. She must have learned it from her mother. When asked she said it was a buffalo honoring song. These things really stick with you.*

5. Lead Up: The Intertribal Buffalo Council, or I-T-B-C, serves as a meaningful partner to federal agencies in buffalo management.

Question: Could you speak to the ways I-T-B-C works alongside the federal government?

*Perhaps the most obvious way is that when one of our National Parks that have herds of buffalo get to the point where they have reached the carrying capacity of the land set aside for buffalo, they call contact ITBC and we can usually arrange for a truck to pick up the surplus buffalo and take it a tribe that wants to start a herd of add to the gene pool of an existing herd. The park doesn't have to cull its herd and the receiving tribe benefits. This is one of the better examples of a win/win situation I have ever heard of.*

*We are also members of the Yellowstone Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) and are able to consult with and offer advice to the Federal Agencies involved in buffalo management at Yellowstone. We have much expertise in this area and agencies have often expressed their appreciation for our input.*

Follow-up: How will H.R. 7954 further that working relationship between the I-T-B-C and the U.S. government?

*It essentially endorses our role and ensures we are consulted with. It sanctions the surplus program and should facilitate our ability to help tribes obtain buffalo. We use the majority of the money we receive from the BIA for Herd Development Grants to tribes. In so doing we are relieving a major headache for the BIA if they had to enter into as many as 90 contracts with tribes wanting help. Our process is very streamlined and we can get the money to the tribes far more quickly and efficiently than the BIA can. We also have in-house staff with expertise we can send to tribes wanting to start herds and check on herd health. The BIA has no such technical staff.*

6. Question: If H.R. 7954 is made law, what would the immediate positive impacts be?

*It would be an affirmation on the part of the US that restoring buffalo to tribes is an important goal of the Federal government.*

Follow-up: What long-term impacts would H.R. 7954 have on the government-to-government relationship between the U.S. and tribal nations?

*The US plays a large role in helping the fishing tribes restore the salmon and other fish that are of such importance to them and that were a part of what was negotiated in their treaties. This bill is saying that creating, protecting and enhancing buffalo is also important for Indian buffalo country. If the US steps up and plays a role and supports us like they are the fishing tribes, it will benefit the relationship tribes have with the Federal government.*