

TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE  
ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES

Presented by: Ervin Carlson, President, InterTribal Buffalo Council

Fiscal Year 2020

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**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

My name is Ervin Carlson and I am a member of the Blackfeet Nation in Montana and serve as the President of the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC). Please accept my sincere appreciation for this opportunity to submit written testimony to the honorable members of the House Committee on Appropriations; Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies. My testimony involves funding requests from the Department of Interior (DOI) (specifically the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)), the National Park Service (NPS), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the Indian Health Service (IHS).

ITBC was granted a federal charter in 2009 pursuant to Section 17 of the Indian Reorganization Act and is comprised of sixty-eight (68) federally recognized Indian Tribes in nineteen (19) states with fifty-five (55) buffalo herds. This year alone, ITBC added the Red Lake Nation of Minnesota, the Sac and Fox Nation and the Tonkawa Tribe, both of Oklahoma, and the Skull Valley Band of Goshutes of Utah. ITBC represents approximate total 900,000 tribal members

American Indians have a long-standing spiritual and cultural connection with buffalo that has not diminished with the passage of time. Historically, buffalo provided the Tribes with food, shelter, clothing, and essential tools for survival. The near extinction of buffalo was analogous to the tragic history of American Indians in this country. However, today's resurgence of buffalo on Tribal lands, largely through the efforts of ITBC, signifies survival of the revered Tribal buffalo culture. ITBC Member Tribes strive to restore buffalo to Tribal lands to rekindle the cultural, traditional and spiritual relationship between buffalo and Tribes and to utilize buffalo to promote the health, and economic well-being of Tribal populations.

On behalf of the Member Tribes of ITBC, I am requesting an increase of \$12,600,000 to our current \$1,400,000 FY2019 funding level for a total funding award for FY2019 of \$14,000,000 from Department of Interior funds to allow the organization to: 1) increase funds for the Tribal herd development grant program, 2) to fund ITBC efforts to serve as a meaningful buffalo management partner to federal agencies, and 3) to fund scientific research on the benefits of buffalo meat for the prevention and treatment of diet related diseases.

**FUNDING HISTORY**

ITBC has been funded through various methods from the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs funding including the President's budget, Congressional earmarks, or administrative action since 1992. ITBC's funding history illustrates Congressional and Administrative support for ITBC's restoration and management program and the Tribal buffalo herds. Annual funding of ITBC provides evidence that buffalo restoration and management is not a limited or one-time "project" but a "recurring program." ITBC has most recently been funded from the BIA, Natural Resources, Tribal Management/Development Projects line item.

## **COMPARISON WITH TRIBAL FISH COMMISSIONS**

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary John Tahsuda of Indian Affairs requested ITBC draft a memo describing the differences in funding between tribal fish commissions and ITBC. After review of public records, case law, and historical documents the results were astounding. Historical differences and the natural differences between buffalo and salmon have set the stage for the disparate treatment the Federal Government shows between buffalo and fishing Tribes today.

One of the most important historical differences is the Boldt Decision. This federal district court case gave the fishing Tribes co-management authority over salmon with the States, access to half of the returning fish each year, and declared the security of Indian fishing rights was a trust obligation of the United States. However, this case stands for the proposition that all American Indians have a right to their traditional foods, and therefore, the Federal Government has a trust responsibility to return buffalo to Tribes. In summation, the Federal Government took buffalo from Indians to subjugate them and now they must give buffalo back.

There are at least seven fish commissions. Combined, these seven organizations cover 52 tribes over 12 states, and an approximate population of 525,000 enrolled tribal members. Thus, ITBC alone represents significantly more Tribes, with a larger member base, over a larger geographic area than seven fish commissions combined. Ten Tribes have memberships in both ITBC and a fish commission.

ITBC and fish commissions provide similar services for member Tribes. However, fish commissions receive approximately 100 times the funding from the Federal Government. This funding includes the same Tribal Management/Development Program that ITBC draws its funding from. It also includes the Rights Protection Implementation Program, and the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Natural Resources Tribal Priority Allocation Programs within the BIA. Fish commissions also receive funding from USFWS, the Department of Commerce, and the Environmental Protection Agency. This allows a single fish commission to employ 10 times the staff and two additional offices as compared to ITBC.

Providing ITBC with additional funding will create the necessary infrastructure to provide buffalo to a larger segment of the Indian community. This in turn will lead to greater self-determination and food-sovereignty opportunities to Tribes because they could produce their own traditional foods and create economic opportunities.

I am here today to request an increase in ITBC's funding from 1% of what fishing Tribes receive to 10%. However, the Federal Government should not send funding from one Indian group to another. The Federal Government has a trust responsibility to all Tribal Peoples. Thus, I am requesting this esteemed body to provide additional funding to the Tribal Management and Development Program and the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Natural Resources Tribal Priority Allocation Programs in the BIA, and in the IHS, NPS, and USFWS for buffalo restoration.

## **FUNDING INCREASE JUSTIFICATION**

### **Increase in Herd Development Grant Funds**

\$1,000,000 of ITBC's funding is distributed directly to ITBC Member Tribes via Herd Development Grants (HDG). The HDG funding has been stagnant despite the continued growth of the Tribal membership of the organization. Today, ITBC collectively manages over 20,000 buffalo, more than double all the buffalo currently managed by NPS. In FY 2019, ITBC members requests over \$3.5 million and many members do not make requests every year because they know

ITBC does not receive the funding it needs. An increase for Tribal herd development grants will provide critically needed funding to protect and manage existing Tribal herds. These funds will create jobs in Indian Country, create sustainable Tribal buffalo herds, and allow Tribes to utilize buffalo for economic development.

#### Funding for National Park Service and United States Fish and Wildlife Service Partnerships

Since its inception, ITBC has partnered with the NPS on buffalo management efforts including population management through roundups and distribution of buffalo to Tribes. This prevents NPS from having to slaughter its surplus buffalo. ITBC has not been funded for its role in these activities but has utilized its own administrative funding to partner with the federal agencies. Additionally, the USFWS does not provide funding programs to Tribes for buffalo restoration efforts. I would request the Committee appropriate funds to support ITBC's role in protecting NPS's wildlife and provide buffalo restoration in the USFWS.

#### Health Related Research

ITBC has a long-term objective to prevent and treat diet related diseases in Native populations through the reintroduction of buffalo meat into daily diets. However, these efforts to coordinate with health care providers have been limited by the lack of scientific evidence of the health benefits of natural grass-fed buffalo diets. ITBC believes research to develop concrete evidence of these health benefits will facilitate ITBC partnerships with health programs to prevent and treat diet related diseases in Native populations. This critical research will support ITBC's efforts to provide buffalo meat to school lunch programs as a healthy alternative to other meat products. ITBC wants to partner with IHS to fund this research to promote traditional, healthy tribal diets.

### **CURRENT ITBC INITIATIVES**

ITBC's primary objectives are to restore buffalo to Tribal lands, and to conserve and manage existing Tribal herds through the promotion of traditional buffalo handling practices and beliefs. ITBC strives to aid Tribes to meet the needs and desires of individual Tribal programs. ITBC attempts to balance the varying interests of Member Tribes from maintaining herds for spiritual purposes to utilizing buffalo as viable economic development endeavors. ITBC accomplishes these objectives as follows:

#### Technical Assistance to Tribes

ITBC assesses current and potential Tribal buffalo programs to determine technical service and infrastructure needs, and then provides technical assistance in the areas of wildlife management, ecological management, range management, buffalo health, cultural practices, and economic development. Further, ITBC assists with construction of fencing and corrals, facility design, water development, and equipment research. ITBC provides annual training sessions (national and regional) designed to enhance Tribal buffalo handling, management. However, current funding levels do not allow ITBC to be responsive to the needs of the growing ITBC Membership. ITBC only has two technical services providers which limits the frequency our member-Tribes receive this support. Enhanced Technical Services would assist Tribes with reaching goals of self-sufficient herds.

### Education and Outreach

ITBC staff provides educational presentations to various audiences including school-age youth on buffalo restoration, conservation efforts, and the historical, cultural relationship between buffalo and American Indians. However, current funding limits outreach and educational efforts. Additional funding would allow more American Indian youth to benefit from the important history of buffalo and Tribal.

### Partnership and Collaboration

ITBC is a member of various Federal and State working groups organized to address buffalo issues. ITBC collaborates with the National Park Service, US Forest Service, and the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to address issues with Yellowstone buffalo. However, ITBC cannot participate to its full potential and serve as a meaningful partner due to a lack of funding for these collaborative efforts.

### ITBC Marketing Program

ITBC strives to develop markets for buffalo meat and products for interested member Tribes at the local and national level. ITBC procures buffalo, as limited funds allow, from Tribes and sells the meat products under a joint Tribal and ITBC label. An increase in funding will enhance these marketing efforts.

### School Lunch Program

ITBC has eight Member Tribes serving Tribal raised buffalo in their school lunch programs to address health concerns of school-age children. ITBC anticipates expanding this program to 20 Tribes in the next three years with increased funding.

## **CONCLUSION**

ITBC has existed for over two decades to assist Tribes with restoration of buffalo to Tribal lands for cultural purposes. No other program exists to assist Tribes with buffalo restoration and protection. ITBC and its Member Tribes have created a new Indian Reservation industry that includes job creation and new revenue for the Tribal economies. ITBC ultimately hopes to restore Tribal herds large enough to support local Tribal health needs and generate sufficient revenue to achieve economically self-sufficient herds.

ITBC and its Member Tribes are appreciative of past and current support from Congress and the Administration. However, I urge the Committee to increase ITBC funding to a total of \$14,000,000 which is a level commensurate with the growth of the Tribal Buffalo Programs and other Tribal wildlife programs. This increase will demonstrate Congressional respect for the national mammal and allow ITBC to fulfill its responsibilities to restore, protect, and manage buffalo.

I would like to thank this Committee for the opportunity to present testimony and I invite you to visit ITBC Tribal buffalo projects and experience firsthand their successes. Questions and/or comments regarding any of the issues presented within this testimony may be directed to Mr. Ervin Carlson, President, or to Ms. Majel Russell, Legal Counsel, at (406) 259-8611.