



The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation



Prepared Statement of the Honorable Rodney Cawston, Chairman
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

Public Witness Hearing—Native Americans

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Good morning Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (the “Colville Tribes” or the “CCT”), I thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony today.

The CCT recommends that the Subcommittee:

- (1) Provide a \$10 million increase to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Forestry account for restoration and additional foresters;**
- (2) Include report language directing the Secretary of the Interior to prioritize tribal requests for wildland preparedness funds; and**
- (3) Include report language directing the Secretary to consult with stakeholders, including Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and report to the Committee on the potential benefits of using Very Large Air Tankers (VLATs) in fire suppression activities.**

Although now considered a single Indian tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation is, as the name states, a confederation of twelve smaller aboriginal tribes and bands from all across eastern Washington State. The Colville Reservation encompasses approximately 1.4 million acres and is located in north central Washington State. The CCT has nearly 9,500 enrolled members, making it one of the largest Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest. About half of our tribal members live on or near the Colville Reservation.

I. PROVIDE A \$10 MILLION INCREASE TO THE BIA FORESTRY ACCOUNT FOR REFORESTATION AND ADDITIONAL FORESTERS

The Colville Tribes joins the Intertribal Timber Council and requests that the Subcommittee (1) increase the BIA Forestry Projects Forest Development line item by \$5 million for replanting and thinning; and (2) increase BIA Forestry (TPA) line item by \$5 million to better enable Indian tribes and tribal organizations to hire additional foresters.

In 2015, the Colville Tribes endured the most destructive fires on an Indian reservation in recorded history. The North Star and Okanogan Complex fires collectively burned more than 255,000 acres on the Colville Reservation—nearly 20 percent of the Reservation’s total land base. Approximately one-fourth of the commercial timber land on the Reservation was burned or severely affected, totaling 788 million board feet of timber. Funding in the Forest Projects Development line item funds the necessary replanting and restoration activities that will continue to take place on the Colville Reservation for years in response to the 2015 fires.

The BIA has a statutory obligation under the National Indian Forest Resources Management Act to replant Indian forest land. Currently, the BIA’s average annual Burned Area Rehabilitation budget, however, is approximately \$3.2 million for tribes *nationwide*. The BIA’s entire \$3.2 million budget for fire rehabilitation would cover planting and restoration of less than 11,000 acres nationwide. At current funding levels, this would mean that hundreds of thousands of acres of forest land that was burned on the Colville Reservation in 2015 may not be replanted for decades, if ever. Acres that were not replanted, or where failures occurred from record setting lack of summer precipitation, will be added to the already existing backlog of forest development activities. Unplanted acres diminish the tribe’s ability to sustainably manage forest resources for both economic and ecosystem benefit.

Equally important is additional BIA funding for foresters, which are essential personnel to increasing the tribal timber harvests. The BIA remains responsible for a wide range of critical forestry functions in its capacity as trustee. These functions include environmental clearances and approval and oversight for timber and salvage log sales. Without additional funding, the lack of forestry staff to perform these and other important trust functions will continue to directly constrain tribal timber harvest levels.

II. INCLUDE REPORT LANGUAGE DIRECTING THE SECRETARY TO PRIORITIZE TRIBAL REQUESTS FOR FIRE PREPAREDNESS FUNDING

The Colville Tribes suggests that the Subcommittee include language in its FY 2021 spending bill that directs the Secretary of the Interior to prioritize tribal requests for wildfire preparedness funding.

In early August of 2017, the Colville Tribes requested \$16,250 in severity funding to prepare for what weather reports predicted was going to be a severe lightning storm on the Colville Reservation. These funds were requested from the BIA’s Northwest Regional Office in Portland, Oregon. The Tribes’ timely request would have covered use of additional bulldozers, personnel, and equipment to prepare areas at high risk of fires from lightning ignition.

The BIA, unfortunately, denied the Tribes’ request. The lightning storm arrived as forecasted, and on August 7, 2017, a lightning strike ignited the Bridge Creek Fire near the town of Keller on the Colville Reservation. The Bridge Creek Fire ultimately burned 4,500 acres and was not fully contained until the following month. Suppression costs for the Bridge Creek Fire exceeded \$16 million, the bulk of which was drawn from the Department of the Interior (DOI)

Wildland Fire Management account. Had the Colville Tribes' initial \$16,250 request been approved by the BIA, the Bridge Creek Fire could have been contained much sooner and at a significant cost savings to taxpayers.

Tribal forest managers are in the best position to assess danger and risk to on-reservation tribal forests. Tribes rely on their forest resources for many uses and purposes, including cultural uses and economic development. Tribes, therefore, have a motivation to protect their forest resources from wildfires in way that other federal land managers do not. For these reasons, this Committee should direct the BIA and the DOI generally to honor tribal preparedness requests to the maximum extent possible.

III. INCLUDE REPORT LANGUAGE DIRECTING THE SECRETARY TO CONSULT WITH STAKEHOLDERS AND REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF USING OF VERY LARGE AIR TANKERS IN FIRE SUPPRESSION

As noted above, in 2015 the Colville Tribes endured the most devastating wildfires in terms of loss of board feet of timber on any Indian reservation in history. One of the reasons for the severity of the fires was the lack of air support to suppress the North Star fire. Not only was available state-provided air support diverted to other fires, but the air support itself may not have been as effective as it might have been to suppress a fire of the North Star fire's size. Large air tankers, referred to as "Very Large Air Tankers," should be available to the DOI and the BIA as a tool to combat these and other mega fires that are now occurring more frequently.

VLATs can respond almost as fast as smaller air support and can carry much larger loads of fire retardant. The U.S. Forest Service has access to a limited number of VLATs through "as needed" or "exclusive use" contracts, but the Colville Tribes is unaware of any VLAT resources available exclusively for use by DOI land management agencies or the BIA. In this new era of wildfires that grow larger, hotter, and faster than ever before, the Colville Tribes believes that DOI and the BIA should have access to exclusive use VLATs as well to prioritize protection of tribal trust land. We suggest the following report language:

The Committee directs the Department to the consult with affected stakeholders, including Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and report to the Committee on the potential benefits, if any, of having Very Large Airtanker (VLAT) assets available for suppression activities on land under the Department's administrative jurisdiction, including land held in trust for the benefit of Indian tribes.

This or similar report language would ensure that DOI examines this issue and provides information back to the Committee. The Colville Tribes and other Indian tribes and tribal organizations would enthusiastically provide comments and case studies for this type of report.

This concludes my testimony. At this time I would be happy to answer any questions that the Subcommittee may have.