

Testimony of William Harris, Chief of the Catawba Indian Nation, South Carolina
"Public Witness Testimony: FY 2021 Appropriations"
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
February 11, 2020

Recommendations:

1. IHS – Provide full funding and advance appropriations for the Indian Health Service.
2. IHS – \$200 million in permanent funding for SDPI.
3. IHS – Prioritization of Preventive Health services.
4. IHS and BIA – Provide increased funding and a dedicated set-aside for health-care related infrastructure development in Indian Country.
5. IHS – Provide funding to address health challenges associated with inadequate housing.
6. BIA – \$50 million for the BIA Road Maintenance Program.
7. EPA – Maintain adequate funding to protect environmental quality in Indian Country.
8. DOI – Maintain Funding for the Tribal Climate Resilience Program and Interior Landscape Conservation Cooperatives

Introduction. Thank you Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify on critical funding needs for American Indian and Alaska Native programs under your jurisdiction. The people of the Catawba Indian Nation thank you for your hard work on behalf of Indian Country and for inviting tribal leaders to submit witness testimony on their communities' behalf. My name is William Harris and I am the Chief of the Catawba Indian Nation in South Carolina. To advance the health and well-being of my people and other tribal nations, I offer the following budget recommendations for fiscal year 2021.

I. Promoting Health and Wellness in Indian Country

Provide Full Funding and Advance Appropriations for the Indian Health Service. The IHS strives to provide tribal citizens with access to high quality and comprehensive medical services. Unlike other federal healthcare agencies, such as the Veterans Health Administration, the IHS must balance the delivery of services with years of underfunding, under-resourcing, and the detrimental, lingering effects of repeated continuing resolutions. The sum of this equation is all too often manifested in negative health outcomes for American Indian and Alaska Natives who depend on the IHS for care. Full advance appropriations for the IHS would promote greater stability in services, medical personnel recruitment and retention, and facilities management. **We strongly urge Congress to fully fund advance IHS appropriations under the FY 2021 budget and beyond to provide consistency and parity in the administration of Indian healthcare.**

Provide \$200 million in Permanent Funding for the Special Diabetes Program for Indians. As you are well aware, communities across Indian Country are associated with alarming statistics related to incidences of diabetes and diabetes-related complications among tribal members. The Catawba Indian Nation is no exception. SDPI is a critical program that has demonstrated success in reducing incidences in diabetes and end-stage renal disease in tribal communities, as well as in preventing, treating, and managing symptoms. The program, however, has been flat-funded at \$150 million for several fiscal cycles. Additional, permanent, funding is needed to support program expansion for both existing grantees and new tribal nations and organizations seeking to

provide these life-changing services to Native people. **We urge Congress to enact a long-term SDPI reauthorization with an annual appropriation of \$200 million in FY 2021.**

Plan for the Future with Dedicated Funding for Preventative Health Services. The Catawba Indian Nation depends on the IHS for the delivery of healthcare services in our community through the local Catawba Service Unit. Access is limited, however, due to the Service Unit's restricted operating hours and lack of emergency and urgent care services. When combined with the disproportionately high rates of chronic illness – including diabetes, heart disease, and behavioral health and substance use disorders – it becomes clear that innovation in healthcare is urgently needed to uproot these negative outcomes. For its part, the Catawba Indian Nation is planting the seeds for healthy generations of tribal members through our Wellness Warriors program. The mission of the Wellness Warriors is to improve overall community health through crosscutting programs, health education, physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco cessation. The program serves as a trellis for life-long community fitness and engagement.

We believe that increased federal funding for preventative care services as an IHS sub-activity would enable our and other tribal nations to cultivate and sustain similar programs. The result would be two-fold benefits: (1) long-term *federal cost savings* through reduced incidence rates of chronic illness and associated medical costs; and (2) long-term *life savings* through increased vitality and wellness among American Indians and Alaska Natives. We were pleased to see the targeted increase in the Preventive Health account for FY 2020. **We urge Congress to continue to invest in America's health through Preventive Health in FY 2021 and beyond.**

Invest in Healthcare Facilities and Related Infrastructure. Like the veins and arteries of a human being that carry life-giving oxygen throughout the body, healthcare facilities and their related municipal infrastructure form the core of a healthy community. Indian Country, however, remains plagued by limited access to quality healthcare facilities and the insidious presence of antiquated waste, water, and infrastructure systems. Tribal governments are consequently – and unavoidably – hampered in our efforts to provide essential services. **We request that Congress provide a specific set-aside and increased funding for Indian Country infrastructure development in the FY 2021 budget to build towards a stronger future.**

Adverse Health Outcomes Associated with Inadequate Housing. Access to affordable, structurally sound housing provides shelter from the proverbial storm and supports the physical and mental health of individuals and families. Reliable affordable housing reduces certain stressors that have been proven to contribute to negative health outcomes for low-income families by freeing up family resources for essential needs like education, food, and healthcare, as well as alleviating stressors associated with overcrowding—an endemic problem throughout Indian Country. Many of these languishing housing-related issues could be addressed by the reauthorization of the Native American Housing and Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA). **We request an increase in IHS funding to address the adverse health outcomes associated with critical housing shortages in Indian Country.**

II. Funding a Holistic Approach to Indian Health

Connect Tribal Communities to Health Services with Increased BIA Roads Construction and Maintenance Funding. Adequate and well-maintained roads are vital to accessing essential

on-reservation programs and services, as well as off-reservation resources. Funding for the BIA Road Maintenance program, however, has been under-resourced for several fiscal year cycles, despite the accumulation of almost \$300 million in backlogged needs. The Catawba Indian Nation has 33 miles of roads included on the BIA Roads Inventory. Maintaining these roads costs \$215,000 annually, but we receive only \$25,000 in federal assistance. The \$190,000 difference is taken from our Tribal Transportation Roads Program allocation, which in turn reduces the amount available for new roads construction to support our housing and economic development projects. These unmet needs place our tribal members in harm's way due to the unnecessary risks posed by unstable and unsafe roads that impair access, damage vehicles, and obstruct the timely arrival of emergency assistance. **We urge Congress to provide at least \$50 million for the BIA Road Maintenance program to protect the health, safety, and welfare of Indian Country.**

Maintain Adequate EPA Funding to Protect the Environmental Quality of Indian Country. We depend on the EPA's fulfilment of its trust responsibilities and partnership obligations to protect human health and our shared environment. We have used and leveraged EPA resources such as the General Assistance Program and Brownfield 128a Program to advance our environmental programs with benefits at the tribal, local, and state levels. For example, we developed an ambient air monitoring program that measures ozone and particulate matter 2.5 micron and smaller. The data is posted on Air Now South Carolina, providing tribal members and State residents with accurate air quality information. We also partner with the State to generate air quality forecasts for a three county area. Moreover, for water equality, we established a water monitoring program using Clean Water Act funding. This program has enabled us to monitor and conduct analysis of pathogens in the water and inform tribal members and leadership of potential health risks. Through these programs, we work to ensure tribal members have access to clean water, air, land and fish that are safe for consumption. The job is ongoing. **We urge Congress to maintain adequate funding for EPA environmental quality programs so that we can achieve a cleaner, healthier and more prosperous country today and for the future.**

Maintain Funding for the Tribal Climate Resilience Program and Interior Landscape Conservation Cooperatives. Today, across the United States, communities are facing increasing public health, safety, and natural resources management challenges associated with our progressively unstable natural environment. Water availability, catastrophic wildfires and floods, invasive species, disappearing tree lines, and accelerated rates of erosion are only limited examples of the ways in which our country is changing. Tribal nations are often among the first to feel the effects of these developments on our human health and natural resources. The BIA Tribal Climate Resilience Program – along with Department-wide Landscape Conservation Cooperatives run in agencies such as the BLM, FWS, NPS, BIA, and BOR – is intended to provide tribal nations with the tools to manage resource stressors and develop adaptive management plans in coordination with federal, state, and local actors, to mitigate and prevent environmental degradation. Maintaining and furthering this progress is critical for all Americans. **We urge Congress to provide \$30 million for the BIA Tribal Climate Resilience Program and \$30 million for Interior Cooperative Landscape Conservation programs.**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. The Catawba Indian Nation looks forward to working with you on addressing these complex, multi-faceted needs going forward.