



The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation



Prepared Statement of the Honorable Jarred-Michael Erickson, Chairman
Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

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

American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Days

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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 on the Subcommittee’s FY 2026 spending bill.

The CCT has three recommendations for the Subcommittee’s consideration:

- (1) Include Bill Language that Preserves FTEs that Serve Indian Country: With recent Executive Branch actions that have dramatically reduced the size of the federal workforce, the CCT is extremely concerned that there will not be sufficient Indian Affairs’ personnel to conduct day-to-day business and properly administer Indian trust property. The CCT requests that the Committee include bill language that ensures that the number of FTEs that serve Indian programs at the beginning of FY 2025 remain intact and eligible for assumption by Indian tribes in FY 2026.
- (2) Public Safety and Justice: The Colville Tribes has a fraction of the number of officers it needs to patrol its 1.4-million-acre (2,200 square mile) reservation. The CCT urges the Committee to provide a significant increase to the applicable accounts for law enforcement officer salaries to enable tribes nationwide to hire more officers and to retain the officers that they currently have.
- (3) Ensure Adequate Funds for Staffing for New IHS Facilities: The Colville Tribes request that the Committee fully fund staffing packages for new Indian Health Service (“IHS”) and Joint Venture facilities that come online in FY 2026.

BACKGROUND ON THE COLVILLE TRIBES

By way of background, although now considered a single Indian tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation is a confederation of twelve aboriginal tribes and bands from across eastern Washington state, northeastern Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia. The present-day Colville Reservation is in north-central Washington state and was established by Executive Order in 1872. The Colville Reservation covers almost 1.4 million acres and its boundaries

include portions of both Okanogan and Ferry counties. Geographically, the Colville Reservation is larger than the state of Delaware and is the largest Indian reservation in the Pacific Northwest.

The Colville Reservation and the CCT's trust lands encompass three congressional districts in Washington state: the Fourth (Rep. Dan Newhouse), Fifth (Rep. Michael Baumgartner), and the Eighth (Rep. Kim Schrier).

I. INCLUDE BILL LANGUAGE THAT PRESERVES FTES THAT SERVE INDIAN COUNTRY

Like other Indian tribes nationwide, the Colville Tribes has been concerned about the short- and long-term impacts of recent Executive Branch actions related to the federal workforce. The Bureau of Indian Affairs ("BIA") has responsibility to approve leases and rights-of-way of Indian trust lands, timber sales, contracts and payment of contract support costs, and other day-to-day transactions. While the CCT has contracted most BIA functions under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act ("ISDEAA"), it relies on the BIA's agency and Northwest Regional Office to provide essential functions, approve fee-to-trust applications, approve timber sales, fight fires, and to provide technical assistance.

For IHS purposes, the Colville Tribes is a "direct service" tribe, which means that IHS provides all health services, from delivery of care to billing, using federal IHS employees. The Colville Tribes has initiated the process to contract all IHS functions under ISDEAA and this process is ongoing, but it will take some time.

The Colville Tribes has grave concerns that the recent Executive Branch actions directed at the federal workforce, including the termination of certain probationary employees and deferred resignations, will leave a gaping hole in the services that the CCT and other tribes rely on.

For Indian tribes like the Colville Tribes that are in rural areas with high poverty rates, these positions are already notoriously difficult to fill, especially for health providers for IHS positions. Even though IHS may have received a temporary reprieve from terminations of probationary employees, these actions will make recruiting for rural IHS positions much more difficult because of the potential for future actions against probationary employees.

The CCT also understands that a reduction in force ("RIF") is being contemplated for at least the BIA, and possibly the IHS as well. If positions are eliminated at either agency, tribes cannot contract them, and they will be lost unless resurrected by a future administration. The CCT assumes that other tribes that are "direct service" are similarly looking at contracting as many functions as they can. Once under the umbrella of an ISDEAA contract, the positions are tribal, not federal, positions. Shifting these positions to tribes is, therefore, consistent with the Administration's efforts to shrink the federal workforce.

Tribes should be afforded ample time and opportunity to assume BIA, IHS, and other contractible functions because the ISDEAA process is deliberative and prescribed by statute and regulations. Tribes should not see programs that they intend to contract gutted in the interim.

For all these reasons, the CCT requests that the Committee include bill language in its FY 2026 bill that will allow tribes to contract BIA, IHS, and Bureau of Indian Education functions at FTE staffing levels that existed at the beginning of FY 2025. This will ensure that intervening Executive Branch orders and memoranda do not have the effect of gutting those functions and rendering them useless to contract under ISDEAA. History has demonstrated that when the United States does not provide adequate staff for administration of Indian trust funds or trust resources, it will eventually cost the United States much more financially. This evidenced by the \$1.5 billion that the United States paid to settle more than 40 tribal breach of trust lawsuits against the United States from 2012 to 2015. Many of the claims were based on duties that the United States never performed because of inadequate staffing levels.

II. INCREASE FUNDING FOR BIA LAW ENFORCEMENT

There is a constant need for additional funding for tribal law enforcement and detention operations. The CCT requests that the Committee provide a \$100 million increase for the Criminal Investigations and Police Services account to enable tribes in all BIA regions to hire more police officers and to retain their existing police officers.

As the Committee is aware, large land-based tribes often lack enough tribal police officers. This often results in police response times more than four hours. There are occasions when the Colville Tribes has only a single officer on duty for the entire 1.4-million-acre Colville Reservation.

Collectively, the Colville Police Department has a 30 percent vacancy rate for both commissioned and non-commissioned officer positions. Nationwide, BIA law enforcement is funded at only a fraction of the actual need. Recruitment and retention remain acute issues even with the Colville Tribes supplementing the BIA funding allocation by more than 200 percent annually.

III. ENSURE ADEQUATE FUNDS FOR STAFFING FOR NEW IHS FACILITIES

The Colville Tribes request that the Committee fully fund staffing packages for new IHS and Joint Venture facilities will come online in FY 2026 in the Staffing of New Facilities account.

Since the inception of the Colville Service Unit in the 1930s, the historically low staffing levels that the CCT has endured have been nowhere near the actual need for health providers. After more than two decades submitting applications and exploring alternative avenues, in 2020, the Colville Tribes was successful in securing one of the five Joint Venture facility construction projects that IHS selected that application round. The project will be for a sorely needed new outpatient clinic in Omak, Washington, and will allow the CCT to update its historically low staff ratios to better reflect actual need. Construction is nearly complete, and the Omak clinic is scheduled to open in November 2025.

While the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee has historically funded staffing packages of new Joint Venture facilities, the CCT understands that IHS may be proposing a significantly lower amount of funds for the staffing of new facilities in its FY 2027 budget formulations. The Colville Tribes request that the Committee scrutinize any budget justifications for the Staffing of New Facilities account that IHS may provide and continue with its historic practice of fully funding new staffing packages.