

**Testimony of the Honorable Dr. Buu V. Nygren, President of the Navajo Nation
Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and
Related Agencies American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Days
March 13, 2026**

Yá'át'ééh, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Dr. Buu Nygren, President of the Navajo Nation (“**Nation**”). The Nation is one of the largest Native American tribes in the country. We provide critical governmental services to more than 400,000 tribal citizens, approximately half of whom reside on the Nation which encompasses more than 27,000 square miles with the states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah spanning into our lands. Thank you for holding these in-person public witness days to hear directly from tribal leaders on our FY 2027 appropriation requests. The agencies involved in our written testimony include the Indian Health Service (“**IHS**”), Bureau of Indian Education (“**BIE**”), Bureau of Indian Affairs (“**BIA**”), and Bureau of Reclamation.

Advance and Mandatory Appropriations to IHS, BIE and BIA

Advance appropriations have been a huge success for the IHS, providing the agency with much-needed stability for operations and providing basic health care services during the FY 2026 appropriations process. Recognizing this accomplishment, the Subcommittee should continue providing advance appropriations well beyond FY 2027 and expand them to critical BIA and BIE programs and services, while also making these appropriations mandatory. This would ensure that the federal trust and treaty responsibility to tribes is upheld during times of uncertainty, and this must be done without taking from other tribal programs.

The IHS National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup released a budget recommendation for FY2027, where they estimate that full funding for IHS would be \$73,007,281,000. According to this estimate, the FY2026 budget allocation for IHS only covered around 11.02% of the full medical needs for Indian Country. This is particularly concerning, considering a Government Accountability Office has established that the Federal government only spends \$4,000 per capita on our health through IHS, which is less than half of what they spend on any other major federal health program.

BIE funding security is likewise crucial at this time, particularly as the agency assumes additional programs and responsibilities previously administered by the U.S. Department of Education. Ensuring that the BIE has stable, predictable funding is necessary to fulfill the federal trust responsibility to Tribal Nations. For FY 2026, BIE received an appropriation of \$1.37 billion, representing approximately a 10% decrease from FY 2025 levels. This reduction comes at a time when the need for investment is growing rather than shrinking. The infrastructure challenges within the BIE system are particularly severe. The agency currently faces an estimated \$1 billion deferred maintenance backlog, along with an additional \$6 billion needed for school replacement and construction projects. Many BIE school facilities are aging and in poor condition, with the cost of major repairs often exceeding \$100 million per school. The BIE also faces significant staffing shortages that affect its ability to administer programs and provide oversight. The agency currently operates at less than 50% of the staffing levels necessary to effectively carry out its responsibilities. BIE

is responsible for more than 180 federally school, many of which have fallen into disrepair due to decades of federal mismanagement and chronic underinvestment.

Congress needs to increase funding for the Indian School Equalization Program by at least \$400 million to ensure that BIE-funded and tribally controlled schools have the resources necessary to support students, teachers, and culturally relevant educational programming. In addition, school safety funding must be fully supported, including the proposed \$93 million to expand and maintain School Resource Officer programs that help protect students and staff in often remote and rural communities.

The BIA likewise requires increased and reliable funding. A priority of Secretary Burgum has been to address the probate backlog in Indian Country. The Navajo Nation estimates that we have thousands of probate cases backlogged on our Nation due to lack of staffing and funding for the Bureau of Trust Fund Services totaling in the tens of millions of dollars in trust assets. For Navajo, we have received flat funding of \$1 million for our Office of Vital Records through our self-determination contract. Given our size, we request an increase of \$5 million per year for Navajo. Our needs are compounded by recent concerns our people have involving misidentification by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the need to move to a fully digital system that allows us to rapidly deploy photographic tribal IDs. More staffing and resources are also needed at the regional level to address grazing, permitting, and leasing issues.

The BIA has also taken on the functions and responsibilities of the Office of Navajo Hopi Indian Relocation (“ONHIR”), and we are appreciative of the rapid efforts of the BIA to work with us to bring finality to the sad story of relocation and the perhaps sadder story of ONHIR’s mismanagement and mistreatment of some of our most vulnerable people. We look forward to continuing to work with the BIA to identify the full scope of needs in these areas.

Mandatory Funding for Contract Support Cost and 105(I) Leases

From FY2025 to FY2026, the budget for Contract Support Cost and 105(I) Leases decreased, despite the need for both of these programs to increase in order to meet the needs of Indian Country. The IHS National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup released a budget recommendation for FY2027 where it is estimated that the binding obligation for Contract Support Costs is that of \$8,958,520, and that therefore the Workgroup recommended that the total budget for Contract Support Costs be \$10,009,520 to meet all those obligations without eating into other parts of the IHS budget. The Workgroup estimated that the total binding obligations for Section 105(I) leases are \$581,656 and suggested that the overall budget for the leases should be raised to \$730,656.

Strengthening Emergency Medical Services

The Navajo Nation Department of Emergency Medical Services (“NNEMS”) is essential to the health and safety of both residents and visitors, responding to nearly 22,000 calls for service in 2025 alone and more than 950 interfacility transport requests. Despite its critical role, NNEMS continues to face severe funding shortfalls that limit staffing, equipment, and service expansion. In 1980, NNEMS was established with special appropriations from IHS, but a 17% funding cut in 1982 drastically reduced staffing and operations. Since then, chronic

underfunding has made it difficult to meet the growing emergency medical needs of the Navajo people. Serving over 314,000 people, NNEMS is a cornerstone of the Nation's emergency response system. Without additional federal support, EMS services will remain strained, impacting response times and access to critical care.

To address this, Congress must increase IHS funding for EMS 638 contracts. As prices for ambulances continue to increase, appropriations for equipment and supplies must also increase so that Tribal EMS programs can acquire new and modern equipment to continue providing quality and effective pre-hospital care. Additionally, Congress must establish a dedicated budget line-item for Tribal Emergency Medical Services to provide consistent funding. These investments are necessary to sustain and strengthen emergency medical care on the Navajo Nation.

Meeting the Needs of the BIA's Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country and the Navajo Nation. The Nation is critically under-resourced in public safety. We have approximately 1 officer for every 1,000 residents, far below the FBI's recommendation of 3.5 per 1,000 residents. Our police stations receive more than 200,000 calls for service annually—we do not have a 911 system on Navajo. Even after an officer is assigned to respond, officers may be responding from locations over a hundred miles away and can take over of an hour to arrive on scene. This shortfall leads to dangerously long response times and increased overtime costs, and the heavy workload takes a toll on our officers, exacerbating retention challenges.

The Navajo Nation's Police Department, Criminal Investigations Department, Corrections Department, and tribal courts system are all funded under BIA 638 contracts. The BIA, however, is drastically underfunded. In their annual report on funding required under the Tribal Law and Order Act, the BIA estimates their actual need at \$3.1 billion, but they are receiving less than \$450 million, not even enough funding to meet 15% of the public safety needs in Indian Country. Ensuring stable, reliable funding each year is essential for Tribes to sustain basic, minimal public safety operations.

The Navajo Nation has two public safety facilities, one in our capital city of Window Rock and another in our largest community of Shiprock, NM, that were condemned in 2019 and have yet to be torn down or replaced. This means our police officers and investigators are working out of makeshift facilities, our district courts are operating out of conference rooms, and our corrections facilities are entirely shuttered in our most prominent communities. This further affects our law enforcement challenges, as officers must now transport detainees more than an hour away to corrections facilities in a neighboring district, taking them off of patrol and out of their district for extended periods of time.

In addition to the facilities challenges, our court system is also in need of additional funding and personnel to assist in addressing the backlog of probate cases. Decades' worth of documents necessary to adjudicate probate cases are stored in paper files and must be sorted by hand, a time-consuming process that we do not have sufficient personnel to undertake. A system to digitize all records would be a major help in the backlog.

\$46 Million to the BIA's Indian Child Welfare Act ("ICWA") Program & \$60 Million for the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act Programs

The ICWA program is severely underfunded and subject to unnecessary funding restrictions. As a result, the Navajo ICWA Program currently operates with a \$6 million shortfall even with limited personnel. We therefore request a full-funding amount of \$46 million for ICWA programs. By fully funding ICWA, tribes throughout the country will be able to invest more in their preventative resources and in reconnecting children with their relatives, which would drastically lower the number of children in the foster care system, which will then drastically reduce costs as foster care programs are the most costly social services programs. For example, the Navajo ICWA program services preserve and reunite Navajo children with their parents, next of kin, or other appropriate families depending on the best interest of the child. On the same vein, we ask for \$30 million on funding for the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Program and \$30 million for the Indian Child Abuse Treatment Grant Program, both of which fall under the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act, as they are chronically underfunded.

Fulfilling Federal Obligations for the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project:

The Navajo Indian Irrigation Project ("NIIP") was authorized by Public Law 87-483 in 1962 to develop 110,630 acres of farmland and divert 508,000 acre-feet of water annually to the Navajo Nation. Over sixty years later, the federal government has yet to complete its obligations under the statute, and approximately 30,000 acres of authorized farmland remain undeveloped—severely limiting our ability to fully utilize our existing water rights and our vast agricultural resources. In 2024, the Bureau of Reclamation estimated that approximately \$2.1 billion would be required to complete the federal government's remaining obligations under Public Law 87-483. Earlier assessments already signaled growing costs as the Bureau of Indian Affairs estimated more than \$175 million in deferred maintenance remediation needs for NIIP infrastructure in 2016. Because funding for operations and maintenance under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 contract has not kept pace with rising costs, these funding gaps will only continue to grow without sustained federal investment. To begin addressing these outstanding federal obligations, the Navajo Nation requests the following appropriations: 1) Increase funding for Natural Resources Management: Irrigation Operations and Maintenance to \$26.6 million in FY2026, reflecting projected NIIP O&M costs of approximately \$9.8 million and the need to address the ongoing federal funding backlog. 2) Increase funding for the WIIN Act (Public Law 114-322), Title III, Subtitle B – Irrigation Rehabilitation and Renovation for Indian Tribal Governments and their Economies – to \$35 million annually, consistent with the level authorized by Congress. 3) Increase the Resources Management Construction Fund to \$90 million in FY2026, including \$30 million specifically for irrigation construction funding, with no less than \$12 million dedicated to completing Block 9, Stages 2 and 3 of the NIIP, which would advance development of the remaining authorized farmland.

We look forward to testifying before the Subcommittee and to future conversations regarding the budget priorities of the Navajo Nation. If you have any questions, please contact Mr. Vince Redhouse, Executive Director of the Navajo Nation Washington Office, at VRedhouse@NNWO.org.