

Written Testimony of Charles Riley, Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma, New Mexico
American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Hearings
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
March 17, 2026

Recommendations:

1. DOI – Funding moratorium for energy leasing in the Greater Chaco Region.
2. DOI – Support funding for Indian Water Rights Settlements.
3. DOI – \$3 million for implementation of the Safeguarding Tribal Objects of Patrimony Act.
4. BIA – Increased funding for Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Enforcement.
5. NPS – \$40 million for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs).
6. BLM – Provide adequate funding to support a comprehensive Resource Management Plan for the Farmington Field Office.
7. BIA, BIE, IHS – Provide adequate funding to properly staff Federal offices serving Tribes.
8. BIA and IHS – Designate Section 105(l) lease and CSC payments as mandatory funding.
9. IHS – Provide permanent advance appropriations for the Indian Health system.
10. IHS – Provide dedicated funding to the Haak'u Health Clinic to offset significant tribally funded repairs.
11. USFS and EPA – Provide funding to support meaningful Tribal participation in consultation for uranium mining projects.

Introduction. Thank you, Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to share our funding priorities for fiscal year 2027. My name is Charles Riley, and I serve as the Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico. The Acoma people are an ancient people. Acoma Sky City has been our mesa-top home for at least 1000 years, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in the United States. We, like other Indian Tribes, share a unique, government-to-government relationship with the United States based on our status as sovereign nations. Every Pueblo governor carries a cane from Abraham Lincoln, which was specifically presented to the governors 150 years ago to acknowledge our sovereign authority over our lands and our people. This cane is a physical embodiment of the recognition of our status and of the commitment of the United States to protect and respect our sovereign rights, as well as to support the well-being of our communities pursuant to the federal trust responsibility.

1. Funding Moratorium Related to Energy Leasing in the Greater Chaco Region. *We request that Congress maintain the moratorium on oil and gas leasing on federal land in the withdrawal area of the Greater Chaco Region.* The Greater Chaco Region is an irreplaceable sacred landscape which surrounds the Chaco Culture National Historical Park and contains innumerable cultural resources and sites sacred to Pueblos and Tribal Nations. We request this moratorium span the lifetime of the legislation and uses the following language "None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to accept a nomination for oil and gas leasing under 43 CFR 3120.6 et seq., or to offer for oil and gas leasing, any Federal lands within the withdrawal area identified in the map of the Chaco Culture National Historical Park prepared by the Bureau of Land Management and dated April 2, 2019." This moratorium would allow the United States to both further its domestic energy production priorities while still honoring and protecting an irreplaceable landscape significant to Pueblos and Tribal Nations. The United States can still unleash American energy and meet domestic production needs for American prosperity through

the upwards of 90% of land already leased for oil and gas development in the greater San Juan Basin.

2. **Funding for Water Rights Settlement.** The Pueblo negotiated a water rights settlement with the United States, the State of New Mexico, and other Tribal Nations and local communities (Rio San Jose Water Settlement). We ask that Congress support full funding for this water settlement, which resolves water claims in New Mexico in a manner beneficial to all parties and which will promote economic development and water security for the future.

3. **\$3 Million for Implementation of the Safeguard Tribal Objects of Patrimony (STOP) Act.** The STOP Act marks a significant advancement in efforts to protect Tribal cultural heritage from illegal trafficking and sale. It also helps to ensure that Tribal sacred objects will be safeguarded for future generations by, among other things, securing their return to their rightful homes—our Tribal communities. However, adequate resources dedicated to STOP Act enforcement are needed to fulfill the Act and enable implementation by DOI and associated agencies. Further, Congress required regulations to implement the STOP Act within one year of its enactment. Rules that were significantly vetted and commented on by tribes in 2024 have yet to be finalized and implemented.

While we wait, we risk our sacred and cultural items are illegally taken from our people, threatening the maintenance of our cultures and traditions and depriving us of the legacy we seek to leave our future generations. Meanwhile, a lucrative black market in our cultural heritage thrives, and without explicit export restrictions many of our sacred and cultural items end up abroad in the hands of unscrupulous dealers and collectors. Once abroad, Tribal Nations have had very little success in efforts to bring them home. The Pueblo was at the forefront in advocating for the STOP Act, motivated by painful experiences of cultural theft, particularly an Acoma Shield which was exported to France.

We support the STOP Act's goal of making it more difficult for unscrupulous dealers and collectors to export our sacred and cultural objects as well as making it easier for Tribal Nations to regain these invaluable objects from abroad. *Therefore, the Pueblo strongly urges Congress to appropriate \$3 million in FY 2027 to implement the STOP Act.*

4. **At least \$40 million for Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPOs).** The preservation of Tribal sacred and cultural sites is a priority for all Indian Country. Damage to these sites is often irreversible, forever altering the way in which we can express ourselves as Tribal people. More Tribes are establishing THPOs under the National Historic Preservation Act to protect this heritage, yet Federal funding has not kept pace with this expansion. Without adequate funding, Tribal governments will have difficulty meeting their preservation compliance duties and responsibilities, which include working with other governments on site identification, conducting surveys, compiling data and samples, documenting best practices, and assisting museums and research centers that preserve and share Tribal culture. *Therefore the Pueblo requests at least \$40 million for THPO support in FY 2027.*

5. **Increased funding for Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Enforcement.** The Pueblo appreciates the inclusion of dedicated NAGPRA enforcement funding for criminal investigations in fiscal year 2026. Dedicated NAGPRA enforcement funding supports the protection of Tribal patrimony by funding the BIA-OJS Cultural Resources Division and dedicated staff and Bureau-wide trainings on the law and the harmful consequences that can ensue when it is violated. As a result, law enforcement has a more culturally competent understanding of the importance of Tribal patrimony. *The Pueblo asks that this funding is maintained in FY 2027 and beyond with annual adjustments for inflation.*

6. Funding for a Comprehensive Resources Management Plan. The Pueblo urges Congress to provide adequate funding to support a comprehensive Resource Management Plan Amendment (RMPA) and Programmatic Agreement (PA) for the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Farmington Field Office. The current RMP, which guides oil and gas development in the San Juan Basin in New Mexico, is severely outdated and does not reflect modern extraction technologies, such as horizontal drilling, that have drastically expanded the footprint of development into some of the most culturally sensitive and fragile areas surrounding Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Without an updated framework, the BLM lacks the necessary tools to responsibly manage these resources, mitigate impacts, and incorporate the latest archaeological and cultural resource data. Since the existing RMP was drafted, significant advancements have been made in understanding the depth and extent of previously unidentified cultural sites—knowledge that must be integrated into decision-making processes to ensure proper consultation with Tribes and the protection of our irreplaceable heritage. Adequate funding to fully implement a PA once finalized is critical to ensure that the agency meets the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act while simultaneously addressing the concerns and needs of regional tribes.

7. Provide Adequate Funding to Properly Staff Federal Offices Serving Tribal Nations. The Pueblo strongly urges Congress to increase funding to BIA, BIE and IHS to properly staff Federal offices that serve and support Tribal Nations and Tribal communities. Federal offices and employees are instrumental for the United States to honor its unique trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations in a multitude of ways, including providing direct services, conducting required reviews and approvals, distributing funds to Tribal Nations, providing technical assistance, and providing the necessary operations and administrative support to ensure these activities are accomplished. Unfortunately, Federal policies aimed at reducing the Federal workforce, such as hiring freezes and the Deferred Resignation Program, have constrained the capacity and effectiveness of Federal offices serving Tribal Nations which were already chronically understaffed. The result is that these critical offices do not have the capacity to effectively and timely fulfill their tasks and responsibilities which hinders Tribal Nations in their pursuit of self-determination and furthering Tribal priorities to best serve Tribal citizens in areas such as economic development, law enforcement, health, public safety, cultural preservation and education.

The Pueblo has experienced significant delays from Federal offices in upholding its responsibilities and obligations which are caused, at least in part, by reductions in Federal staff and the resulting overbearing workload placed on those remaining Federal employees who are tasked to do more with less resources and assistance. For example, the Pueblo has waited years for the BIA to process the Pueblo's application to place land into trust. This delay has held up efforts to effectuate a land exchange with BLM to reroute the Continental Divide Trail into the El Malpais Visitor Center and the City of Grants to enhance public safety and promote tourism in the area for the benefit of all parties. In addition, Pueblo of Acoma will continue to lose approximately \$500,000 a year from Pueblo taxes it cannot collect, and State of New Mexico taxes it must pay, and Acoma will not be able to continue economic development on the land.

Further, the Pueblo assumed control of the IHS Acoma-Canoncito-Laguna facility which now operates as the Haak'u Health Center. The Center provides vital healthcare to Pueblo citizens and the surrounding community. Unfortunately, funding received after assumption of operations is inadequate to fully staff physicians, nurses, and other key positions. Such understaffing and its resulting delays are inefficient, unsustainable, and go against the Federal government's unique trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations. *Therefore, the Pueblo strongly urges Congress to increase*

funding to hire and retain Federal employees to fully staff BIA, BIE, IHS, and their respective offices including, but not limited to, the BIA Office of Trust Services, the BIA Office of Justice Services, the BIA Regional and Agency offices, and individual IHS-supported facilities such as Acoma-Canoncito-Laguna Clinic which is now operated by the Pueblo of Acoma as the Haak'u Health Center.

8. Mandatory Funding for Contract Support Costs (CSC) and Section 105(l) Lease Payments. The Pueblo appreciates this Subcommittee's commitment to ensuring that CSC and Section 105(l) lease costs are fully funded by including an indefinite discretionary appropriation in past years. *We ask that Congress build on this important work in FY 2027 by designating these accounts as mandatory funding.* CSC and Section 105(l) lease funds are already an entitlement under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA). Changing the appropriation of these accounts from discretionary to mandatory would bring Federal funding into line with the clear legal requirements of the authorizing statute.

9. Provide Permanent Advance Appropriations to the Indian Health System. The Pueblo urges Congress to fully fund IHS on a permanent two-year advance appropriations cycle to fulfill the United States' obligation to provide for Indian health. We strongly support the IHS Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup's recommendation for \$73.0 billion to fully fund the Indian health system budget. For many Pueblo citizens, IHS-funded facilities, like the Haak'u Health Center, are the only accessible healthcare provider—especially in remote areas, where it may take an hour or more to seek emergency care.

10. Provide Dedicated Funding to the Haak'u Health Clinic to Offset Significant Tribally Funded Repairs. In 2025, the Pueblo, through the Acoma Health Board, assumed control over providing local health services at the Acoma-Canoncito-Laguna (ACL) Clinic pursuant to ISDEAA which it now operates as the Haak'u Health Clinic. Due to chronic underfunding, the ACL Clinic required the Acoma Health Board to make significant repairs to ensure the ACL Clinic could be operational. For example, the ACL Clinic did not have hot water when Acoma assumed control over the facility from IHS. Staff housing, critical for recruiting medical providers was dilapidated. These critically needed repairs diverted Tribal funds that could have otherwise been used to enhance health services at the Clinic. *We ask Congress to dedicate at least \$7.6 million (subject to such increases needed based on completion of a formal comprehensive assessment) in Maintenance and Improvement (M&I) funding or other facility construction funds specifically to the Haak'u Health Clinic to offset the significant repairs made with Tribal funds.*

11. Provide funding to support meaningful Tribal participation in consultation for uranium mining projects. The Pueblo remains deeply concerned about the potential impact of proposed uranium mining projects on Mt. Taylor—a mountain sacred to the Acoma people—and to the limited available clean water sources in the area which are vital in this arid region. Several proposed uranium projects on or around Mt. Taylor are in various stages of development, but all are designated as FAST-41 projects by the Permitting Council. The Pueblo desires to meaningfully consult on all uranium mining projects in this area to ensure that they do not adversely and irreparably impact those limited sources of clean water for the region and the Pueblo's cultural resources and properties. However, the lack of sufficient financial assistance to Tribal Nations to support consultation activities, such as hiring technical experts to advise the tribes or funding for cultural resource assessments and monitors, hinders the Pueblo from meaningfully consulting on these projects. *The Pueblo urges Congress to dedicate funding to the United States Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that Tribal Nations have the resources to meaningfully participate in consultation related to uranium mining and recovery activities.*