

SANTA ROSA RANCHERIA TACHI TRIBE

A FEDERALLY RECOGNIZED TRIBE

Leo Sisco
Chairman



Robert Jeff II
Vice-Chairman



Candida L. Cuara
Secretary



Rosa Hernandez
Treasurer



Jaime Pimentel/Bryce Baga
Delegates

TESTIMONY OF LEO SISCO, CHAIRMAN SANTA ROSA INDIAN COMMUNITY OF THE SANTA ROSA RANCHERIA

UNITED STATES HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES

HEARING ON TRIBAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOUSING AND TRANSPORTATION

April 28, 2023

INTRODUCTION

My name is Leo Sisco and I serve as the Chairman of the Santa Rosa Rancheria Tachi-Yokut Tribe (“Tachi Tribe” or “Tribe”). I would like to thank Chairman Cole, Ranking Member Quigley, and Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to share our Tribe’s perspective regarding the challenges faced within Indian Country to accessing federal funds for its transportation-related needs. Our Tribal Reservation is located in south central California, in the heart of northern Kings County, approximately 4.5 miles southeast of the city of Lemoore and 12 miles from the city of Hanford. The people of the Santa Rosa Indian Community are descendants of the Tachi Yokut, who have lived in the southern San Joaquin Valley since time immemorial. Contact with non-Indians resulted in 99% of the Tachi-Yokut population being killed by genocide, disease, and malnutrition by 1903. The Santa Rosa Rancheria was formally established in 1934 on forty acres of isolated farmland near Lemoore, California. The Tribe is governed by a six-member Tribal Council that consists of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, and two delegates. Our people have worked tirelessly to rise to the

challenge of reestablishing our cultural identity and building our economic self-sufficiency. Over the last nine decades, through efforts of the Tribe to restore its historical homelands, the Tribe's Reservation has grown to approximately 3,200 acres of land. We own an additional 858 acres adjacent to our current Reservation that will soon be acquired by the United States to be held in trust for the benefit of the Tribe. Our Tribe is comprised of approximately 1,200 enrolled members, many of whom live on or near the Reservation. As both our membership and land base have expanded, Kings County has grown around us and now has a population of over 150,000 people.

We pride ourselves with having a strong and productive relationship with our local governmental partner – Kings County. Because the roads that run through our tribal lands are county roads, it can only be through coordinated efforts with Kings County, that the Tribe can have its current road infrastructure needs addressed. We need federal funds to be made accessible for this purpose.

SANTA ROSA RANCHERIA'S CURRENT AND FUTURE TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT NEEDS

Our Tribe has long been concerned about deteriorating roads on and around the Reservation, especially as we continue to expand the Tribe's economic base, which will attract more vehicle traffic to the area. At present, the Tribe operates three businesses on our reservation: the Tachi Palace Casino Resort, which features 2,000 slot machines and 21 table games as well as six dining venues and three bars alongside a 255-room hotel and event spaces, Coyote Entertainment, which houses a movie theatre, e-sports lounge, and dining, and Yokut Gas. On the additional reservation land we are adding through the fee-to-trust process, we plan to develop a cultural center, RV park, recreational fishing pond, and commercial spaces for tribal members' businesses, all of which will bring additional traffic to the area. In the last fifteen years, there have been six fatalities on the county roads around the Reservation, including the deaths of two tribal elders. Most of these fatalities involved pedestrians accessing tribal businesses using county roads, which do not have traffic control or safety mechanisms. Traffic control

and other safety improvements are especially necessary in this area of the Central Valley because of the dense tule fog that makes driving conditions particularly dangerous.

Our rural location presents unique challenges that limit our economic opportunities. However, with gaming and related entertainment offerings, we have been able to generate revenue that not only benefits tribal members, but also the non-native residents of our community. For example, we have been able to donate \$1.3 million to the County and provide potable water to the Central Union Elementary School. Furthermore, we are a major employer in the area with the Tachi Palace Casino Resort and its enterprises employing over 1,300 native and non-native people.

The area around the Reservation is primarily rural residential and agricultural and Central Union Elementary School is nearby. As you can imagine, this results in significant traffic on the roads in the area, including heavy farm vehicles and school buses. On its own, Kings County cannot begin to address these infrastructure improvements until 2030 at the earliest, but the road repair needs around the Reservation are significant and public safety considerations require sooner action.

Just as the recent return of Tulare Lake from flooding has highlighted the deficient water infrastructure in our area, our business development has exposed transportation infrastructure deficiencies. In concert with our compact negotiations with the State of California, we entered into a Memorandum of Understanding ("MOU") with Kings County in 2020 to address public safety issues related to our planned development. This includes traffic and road improvements as well as building a new fire station and training facility located on the reservation, all at the sole expense of the Tribe.

The Tribe has been administering some transportation resources through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and has begun coordination with the Department of Transportation regarding other available resources to address our increasing transportation infrastructure needs. We have also been working with the County on a regular basis for the last three years to achieve the goals set forth in our MOU and have

developed a strong working relationship. Under the terms of the MOU, the County depends on the Tribe to finance public safety initiatives on and around the reservation and the Tribe depends on the County to provide an experienced workforce and the necessary equipment. Effective and efficient use of any Department of Transportation funding the Tribe receives should permit the Tribe to pass those funds through to the County, which not only has the capacity to complete the necessary repairs, but also has exclusive jurisdiction over many of the roads around the Reservation.

IMPROVING TRIBAL ACCESS TO EXISTING FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION FUNDING

Improving the transportation infrastructure within Indian Country has a direct impact on tribal self-sufficiency. We believe that federal agencies can improve tribal access to existing federal funds and programs so that they may be better utilized by our Tribe and tribes across the country. To the extent possible, federal agencies should simplify application and reporting requirements as much as possible, bearing in mind that many tribes who desperately need funding for infrastructure improvements have limited resources. Furthermore, the federal government must recognize that flexibility in the administration and use of funding is imperative for tribal recipients. According to the National Tribal Transportation Facilities Inventory, there are approximately 160,000 miles of public roads and many of these roads are subject to the shared jurisdiction of tribes and local governments. Allowing tribal recipients to pass funding through to local governments for infrastructure improvements on shared roads is the most efficient and fiscally responsible way to achieve safer roads across the country.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we believe that effective tribal-local government-to-government relationships can serve to improve the transportation needs within Indian Country. To do so, however, utilization of federal funds should be made as flexible as possible to allow for local government assistance and involvement where needed. Through this, tribes can exercise their self-governance to timely address the critical

public safety needs of the tribal and local community.

Again, we thank the Subcommittee for its consideration of these issues that are vitally important to the Tachi Tribe and to all of Indian Country. I respectfully request that this written testimony be made part of the Subcommittee's hearing record and would be happy to answer any questions that the Subcommittee Members may have at this time.