



# NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

## U.S. House Of Representatives Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

March 23, 2015

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On behalf of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), we thank you for holding this important hearing on the President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Budget for Native American programs. As the most representative organization of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, NCAI serves the broad interests of tribal governments across the nation. As Congress considers the FY 2016 budget and beyond, leaders of tribal nations call on decision-makers to ensure that the promises made to Indian Country are honored in the federal budget.

Agriculture production and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs are vitally important to Native economies and are the economic backbone of more than 200 tribal communities. USDA houses programs that broadly touch every aspect of Native communities and work with other related federal agencies and is a major component of Indian Country's economic, employment, and nutrition. In fact, 35 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in rural communities and nearly 40 percent of Indian Country's jobs are dependent on agriculture. Congressional funding for agriculture, ranching, subsistence fishing and farming, conservation, forestry, housing, water, broadband, and related activities through USDA programs must be increased and supported. These programs generate significant benefits for tribes, rural communities, and the nation by promoting economic development, job opportunities and growth, community revitalization, self-sufficiency, youth engagement, and healthier eating.

### **Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations**

- Increase funding for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations to \$115 million.
- Appropriate \$5 million to develop a traditional foods market for FDPIR.

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) currently serves approximately 276 tribes that do not have easy access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) offices or authorized food stores. Through 100 Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and five state agencies FDPIR provides USDA foods to low-income households and the elderly living on Indian reservations and to American Indian and Alaska Native households residing in eligible areas near reservations or in Oklahoma. The ITOs also provide employment to local and tribal personnel who administer the program. As the temporary funding increases for SNAP under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act expired in October 2013, the demand on FDPIR is increasing, leaving some programs with food shortages. Additional funding is needed to address the new demands on the programs, rising food cost—especially the increasing price of protein and the need to improve program operations. Further, Congress authorized the USDA to purchase traditional and locally-grown foods, but it has been difficult for tribes to create a sustainable supply of traditional foods due to the lack of infrastructure and local capacity.

### **Support and Fully Fund All Nutrition Assistance Programs**

- Maintain the current structure of and support funding of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- Support the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.
- Support the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

With 24 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, 68 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native children qualifying for free and reduced price lunches, and American Indians and Alaska Natives making up more than 12 percent of the participants in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) the importance of food assistance in Indian Country cannot be overstated. Any cuts to SNAP, WIC, or school lunch programs directly diminish the food, and in some cases the only meals, available to Native children, pregnant women, elders, and veterans. No one, especially our tribal citizens most in need, should ever have to go without food.

**Increase the USDA's Office of Tribal Relations at a minimum of \$1.5 million**

The Office of Tribal Relations (OTR), located within the Office of the Secretary, is a critical voice for agriculture in Indian Country within the USDA, especially since a vast majority of USDA's services and programs affect and touch tribal lands and communities. Many times, when decisions are being made, there is a need to open lines of communication between the agency and Indian Country. OTR serves a linchpin role in expanding all USDA program support throughout Indian Country, as well as ensuring that relevant programs and policies are efficient, easy to understand, accessible, and developed in consultation with the American Indian and Alaska Native constituents they impact. The OTR is also responsible for coordinating policies affecting American Indians and Alaska Natives across other federal agencies and throughout the USDA. Since it is now a permanent office under the Office of the Secretary and with the plethora of new and improved programs for Native Americans in the 2014 Farm Bill, OTR needs to be funded at least \$1.5 million.

### **Increase the Federally-Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) to \$5 million.**

Congress mandates research and extension services in every county in the nation. These services support farmers, natural resources managers, youth (via 4-H youth programs), and communities by providing a FRTEP agent to liaise with other USDSA programs, provide training in farm and ranch business management, supervise 4-H and youth development activities, and coordinate special training programs, including application of new agriculture technologies. While there are more than 3,100 extension offices available to farmers nationwide, fewer than 30 extension agents serve Indian reservations, with current funding of only \$3 million available to 1862 and 1890 Land-Grant Institutions and the University of the District of Columbia. An increase to \$5 million would begin to address this persistent inequity.

### **USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**

- Fund the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with at least \$1.6 billion as required by the 2014 Farm Bill.
- Fund the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) at a minimum of \$1.449 billion.

Between FY 2010 and FY 2011, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) saw an 85 percent increase in tribal participation in their programs, which could be attributed to USDA's outreach to tribal governments. Specifically, NRCS has assisted with the establishment of 33 Tribal Conservation Districts by working with the Intertribal Agricultural Council (IAC) and Indian Nations Conservation Alliance (INCA). American Indians and Alaska Natives hold their natural resources as sacred and depend heavily upon them for economic, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. Historically, federal natural resources funding for tribes has been limited, as tribes are ineligible for dozens of federal natural resource programs. Other funding for tribal natural resource programs under Bureau of Indian Affairs' appropriations consistently experiences the smallest budget

increases of all the Department of the Interior bureaus. While working to sustain essential efforts amidst the harsh budget climate and potential cuts to funding, tribes should have access to new opportunities afforded by USDA's NRCS programs. The 2008 Farm Bill authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to provide up to 90 percent of the costs associated with planning and implementing conservation practices for tribes. In addition, up to 30 percent of such payments may be provided in a short-term advance for purchasing materials or contracting. Tribes are also included in the five percent set-aside of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds and the five percent set-aside of Conservation Stewardship Program acres for socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers. Since the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program was rolled into EQIP in the 2014 Farm Bill, NCAI requests that the funding levels continue to steadily increase for EQIP, which provides financial and technical support to tribes and others to install or implement structural and management conservation practices on eligible agricultural land.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is another vital program in the NRCS. The CSP provides crucial help in reducing soil erosion, enhancing water supplies, improving water quality, increasing wildlife habitat, and reducing the damage caused by floods and other natural disasters. Funding this program at \$1.466 billion is necessary to cover technical and financial assistance needed for a full enrollment of the acres authorized by Congress. The CSP program is an important resource for tribes as tribal participation has been increasing over the years with a 172 percent increase from FY 2010 through FY 2011, with 246 contracts to tribes totaling \$10.4 million.