



CENTRAL COUNCIL
Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska

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July 26, 2023

WRITTEN TESTIMONY
PRESIDENT RICHARD PETERSON
Central Council Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
2023 Farm Bill Hearing

Chairman Schatz, Vice-Chair Murkowski, and honorable members of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs,

My name is Richard *Chalyee Éesh* Peterson, and I am Kaagwaantaan from the Eagle's Nest House. I grew up in the Haida village of Kasaan, Alaska. I have served as President of Central Council of the Tlingit & Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (Tlingit & Haida) since 2014. Tlingit & Haida is the largest federally and state recognized tribe in Alaska and the 12th largest tribe in the nation. I am grateful for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the over 35,000 tribal citizens we represent worldwide regarding our Tribal priorities and our support for the expansion of authorities within the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2023 Farm Bill (USDA). As Indigenous people, our connection to the land and waterways is not only deeply spiritual but practical, providing us with sustenance and resources vital to our existence. We advocate for co-management agreements that respect tribal sovereignty and traditional ecological knowledge while promoting cooperation between Tribes and federal / state agencies to protect the delicate balance of our ecosystems.

Tlingit & Haida serves 18 villages and communities spread across 43,000 square miles (about the size of Kentucky) of our traditional homelands throughout Southeast Alaska. The management of traditional Indigenous lands and waters is crucial to maintaining our way of life and is an expression of our sovereignty. Our shared ancestral lands and waters provide incredible opportunities for Indigenous-led, large-scale, collaborative projects that can connect and restore the lands, waters, and wildlife that are the foundation of our cultural existence and economic welfare.

Tlingit & Haida strongly supports the 2023 Farm Bill policies that can positively impact Tribal self-governance and co-management opportunities, as well as economic development opportunities to sustain present and future generations of Alaska Native peoples. Tlingit & Haida recognizes and is grateful for the incremental steps that have been made through the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy, for example, but current agreements are limiting in scope for both tribes and the USDA.

First and foremost, the expansion of 638 and self-governance authorities is both an opportunity and obligation for the federal government. As you know, the federal government has fallen short

in implementing its trust responsibility to adequately address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Indigenous communities, particularly in Southeast Alaska. Self-governance – and the co-management that can go hand in hand with it – are not gifts to Tribes – they are a recognition that the federal government cannot and does not have the right to tell our history upon our homelands or to shape the future of this place without us at the table.

Tlingit & Haida is actively pursuing co-management of the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area and Visitor's Center in Juneau, Alaska. The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center attracts over 1,000,000 visitors each year. Currently, there is no acknowledgment of Indigenous peoples – our culture or our history at this location managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). This is a failure to tell the story of that place that Tlingit & Haida seeks to remedy. More than enrichment, a visitor experience that incorporates and fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of our heritage is the accurate narrative only the Indigenous people have the knowledge and the right to tell. By not only promoting Indigenous-led tourism, but shared management of this very significant ecosystem, we can generate economic opportunities for our people, support local businesses, and most importantly, showcase the rich cultural diversity of our region to the world. While this desire has been made clear to Secretary Tom Vilsack and all levels of leadership at the USFS, the development and implementation of meaningful agreements continues to be held up because USDA lacks 638 authorities.

Alaska Tribes have a strong history and track record when it comes to successful 638 compacts and contracts. The Alaska tribal health system speaks for itself as a resounding success for compacting. Tlingit & Haida was one of the first of twenty tribes in the U.S. to compact with the government, and the very first to take on the full measure of self-governance, nearly shutting down the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Southeast regional office.

If compacting authorities are expanded to USDA, it is a win-win scenario for the federal government, tribes, and the public. As governments, we will finally have the tools to allow us to work together for the management of our lands and waters. Anything less than this self-governance would continue the gap between the rhetoric of co-management from our federal partners and the reality of what they can deliver using existing templates. Why re-create the wheel when it is 638 authority that has a demonstrated record for honoring Indigenous sovereignty and successful implementation?

Our people have stewarded the traditional homelands and waters of Southeast Alaska since time immemorial. We are the experts of this place – where we thrived and nourished our people for tens of thousands of years. Again, we seek to work collaboratively to enhance co-management and stewardship opportunities – not only for Alaska Tribes, but to enrich the way U.S. agencies operate and understand our unique challenges and opportunities within our region.

As is true in the face of a rapidly changing climate, access to our traditional and customary foods has changed since colonization. Being one of the largest, most isolated, and most geographically dispersed Tribal populations nationwide, Tlingit & Haida citizens largely rely on foods and goods that are shipped by water or air from the lower 48. This makes access to healthy foods difficult, costly, and volatile. We seek to expand opportunities to secure access to healthy foods that support

our physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. In addition, our solutions have the further benefits of advancing opportunities for economic sovereignty for our communities as well.

Tlingit & Haida is actively working to advance our regional greenhouse program to support our youth and elders, and the overall well-being of our communities. It's here that we've grown both Haida and Tlingit potatoes, distinct potato varieties that have been proven to trace their roots to Peru, which demonstrates how far our culture and economies have stretched. Our traditional foods should be included on the list of approved foods for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Tlingit & Haida has recently become the owner of the Alaska Seafood Company in Juneau and we are thrilled about the opportunities this will provide to advance our traditional food security program and our economic sovereignty. Furthermore, our potatoes, seaweed, gumboots, salmon, halibut, berries, beach asparagus, kelp and seal nourish our bodies differently and better than the foods we currently import. We support Senator Murkowski's efforts for FDIPR and that of her micro-grants for food security opportunities that enhance the access to an improved quantity and quality of locally grown and harvested food for our communities.

Finally, Tlingit & Haida supports efforts to better research and develop sustainable mariculture opportunities for our communities. Alaska's traditional foods, such as kelp, are not only part of our cultural heritage but also essential to our food security and health. The inclusion of these traditional foods within FDIPR and the development of mariculture programs is vital to preserving our cultural practices and ensuring the availability of nutritious and locally sourced food for our communities. We call upon this committee to support initiatives that promote sustainable mariculture practices, rooted in our traditional knowledge, and respect Tribal rights to harvest and co-manage mariculture resources.

Tlingit & Haida is actively working with regional partners to develop and support programs for our communities that provide food and economic security. These programs offer not only the promise of nourishing foods and stable economies, but also an opportunity to restore the resources that have long sustained us as Indigenous people. The lands and waters were not pristine and untouched, they were stewarded for the success and longevity of our people and ecosystems.

I express my most sincere gratitude to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for considering our testimony. As the President of Tlingit & Haida, I urge this committee to take meaningful action that supports Tribal self-governance, the expansion of 638 compacting, co-management of our lands and waters, and opportunities to include, enrich, and protect access to our traditional foods. Together, we can build a future that preserves our culture, strengthens our communities, and ensures the well-being of generations to come.

Gunalchéesh, Háw'aa (Thank you) for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Peterson,
President

