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Chairman Schatz, Vice Chair Murkowski, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the state of economic development in Indian Country and the role that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) plays in supporting Tribal Nations, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. I come to you as the first Chickasaw woman to serve as General Counsel of USDA, a Senate-confirmed position.

The USDA plays a central role in supporting food security, rural infrastructure, and agricultural and forestry industries across the nation. USDA has deep roots in rural communities—with hundreds of local offices across the most rural parts of America and a presence in more than seventy countries around the world.

Yet, the Department of Agriculture has a long, complicated history with food, agriculture, and outreach in Indian Country. We acknowledge that we have not always listened to indigenous perspectives. I am grateful to be testifying before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, which will be an invaluable partner in our efforts to rebuild trusted relationships with Tribal Nations and enhance our support of Tribal economic development. Furthermore, we acknowledge that federal treaty and trust responsibilities are shared by the entire federal government, including the USDA.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is embracing the opportunity to improve this history and truly do better. Regular, meaningful and robust consultations with Tribal leadership underscore the degree to which COVID-19 compounded supply chain interruptions and exposed deep cracks in our food systems—cracks that disproportionately affect Tribal and rural Americans. USDA heard two specific pieces of feedback—that new and expanded tools can help support Tribal Nations in their efforts to increase supply chain resiliency and that they seek food sovereignty to ensure that local production can have a local impact.

We have engaged many times with Tribal leadership in consultation on a variety of topics. Very often, those discussions have pointed to COVID-19 disruptions that have exposed numerous areas where USDA's programs and services can have new or expanded impact. Specifically, we heard and understand that food sovereignty is Tribal sovereignty. To that end, we have launched an Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative which is meant to aid USDA in rethinking our programs in new ways to support food sovereignty in Indian Country.

This vision requires originality and innovation in order to drive real economic development in Tribal communities. The Department is examining existing programs and new authorities to find ways to support Native seed saving, wild food foraging, and use of traditional foods to meet nutritional needs. The Department is also working to support Native producers to identify markets inside and outside Indian Country, access USDA food procurement programs, and promote native-produced foods. Rethinking our food and agricultural programs within this context will require administrative and statutory changes to support Native agricultural producers

through farm and rural development programs. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate with Congress to rethink creative ways to keep old promises.

Food Security

Lack of Tribal trust in the federal government is partially rooted in our failure to ensure that Tribes across the United States have access to enough food. More than sixty percent of counties with a majority Native population were projected to experience higher rates of hunger in 2020.¹ In a pre-pandemic study of hunger in four Tribes, the University of California Berkley found that ninety-two percent of households in the geographic region suffered from food insecurity.² USDA's feeding programs have often fallen short in addressing Tribal hunger, nor have they leveraged the knowledge of Tribal leaders to better manage programs and incorporate traditional foods.

An important way to address this problem is by connecting Tribal farmers and ranchers to feeding programs. We are grateful that in the 2018 Farm Bill Congress granted USDA the authority to operate a Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Self-Determination Demonstration Project. This project enabled the Food and Nutrition Service to select projects from Tribes administering FDPIR and permit the Tribes to directly purchase foods for their FDPIR packages.

USDA implemented the Demonstration Project in November 2021 and disbursed \$3.5 million to eight Tribes.³ In total, seven projects were selected involving eight Tribes, and each pilot project made a Tribal or native produced purchase. The joint project between the Oneida Nation and Menominee Indian Tribe features buffalo, beef, and apples from the Oneida Tribe, wild rice from the Fond du Lac Reservation, and whitefish and lake trout from the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. These projects demonstrate that when the Department has the tools to support Tribal self-determination under FDPIR, Tribes can procure food locally, drive economic growth, and improve nutrition security by way of traditional foods.

Infrastructure

Before working to expand new market access and Native product promotion, we must ensure that Tribal communities have the infrastructure they need to succeed. High-speed broadband, safe drinking water, sanitary wastewater systems and affordable access to healthcare all underpin the success of any initiatives to support economic growth in Tribal Nations. USDA is uniquely positioned to support these infrastructure needs. Rural Development operates more than forty programs—the vast majority of which are open to Tribal participation—to support rural America.

The Grants for Rural and Native Alaskan Villages program helps remote Alaskan villages provide safe, reliable drinking water and waste disposal systems for households and businesses. The most recent round of ReConnect funding sets aside nearly a third of the funding for match-free grants for Tribes and Socially Vulnerable Communities to expand access to high-speed

¹ <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/native-american>

² <https://nifa.usda.gov/announcement/video-games-offer-clues-help-curb-animal-disease-outbreaks-farmer-swine-wearing-white>

³ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/fns-0010.21>

broadband—connecting hospitals to critical telehealth services, students to distance learning, and Tribal businesses to global markets for their products. Thanks to Congress and President Biden’s transformational investments in infrastructure, we are one step closer to closing the digital divide for Tribal communities. USDA’s rural development programs have not always been designed with Tribes in mind, which is why the Biden-Harris Administration is working to address barriers for Tribal communities and support the critical infrastructure that is required to foster meaningful economic growth.

Supply Chain & Capacity Building

COVID-19 exposed serious risks in the United States’ food supply chain—it is rigid, consolidated, and unable to adapt to quickly changing circumstances. These issues run much deeper in Tribal, Native Alaskan and Native Hawaiian communities. USDA published *USDA Agri-Food Supply Chain Assessment: Program and Policy Options for Strengthening Resilience*⁴, which documents broadscale supply chain issues following COVID-19, including across Indian Country, and recommendations to addressing these problems.

Moreover, when considering policies to support economic development in Indian Country, expanding Tribal processing capacity presents new opportunities for producers to grow, process, and trade food locally, regionally and internationally. This work has additional meaning in Tribal communities, where agricultural economies have long been tied to traditional livestock and seafood management and production. Recognizing the unique position Tribes can hold in the expanding protein processing capacity, USDA recently hosted a Tribal consultation and listening session for Creating a Tribal Action Plan for Fairer Meat, Processing, and Seafood Processing, where over 200 Tribal Leaders and specialists across Indian Country shared their insights.

Meat and poultry processing also presents a significant opportunity for economic development in Indian Country. We are hearing remarkable interest from Tribes in expanding processing capacity for livestock, poultry, and seafood. USDA is working to support this interest across the nation, but also specifically in Tribal communities.

In January, the Department announced \$1 billion in grants and other support from the American Rescue Plan to expand meat and poultry processing options, strengthen the food supply chain, and create jobs and economic opportunities in rural areas, including Tribal communities. USDA Rural Development will make available grants through the Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program to fund startup and expansion activities in the meat and poultry processing sector. USDA is also deploying the new Food Supply Chain Guaranteed Loan Program to back private investment in processing and food supply infrastructure that will strengthen the food supply chain.

Tribal ranchers and processors have seen the value and the opportunities they work so hard to create move away from the communities where they live and operate, and this Administration is committed to making investments to support economic systems where the wealth created in rural and Tribal areas stays in those areas. USDA’s vision of a food system is one that ensures

⁴ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/USDAAgriFoodSupplyChainReport.pdf>

producers receive a fair share of the food dollar, particularly in Tribal Nations, Native Alaskan and Native Hawaiian communities.

Procurement & Native Product Promotion

As USDA works to expand processing capacity in Tribal communities and Native agricultural producers continue to expand their presence in food production, we continue to seek out ways to expand new markets for these producers. We are hearing Tribes express interest in producing and selling foods to be distributed and marketed domestically and internationally.

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service works closely with the Food and Nutrition Service's Food Distribution Division to determine what products to make available through FDPIR, and participates in regular Tribal Leaders Consultations with FNS. As part of the effort to purchase traditional foods, AMS has partnered with FNS and FDPIR representatives to purchase bison and blue cornmeal beginning in 2015, wild salmon filets and wild rice beginning in 2016, catfish filets beginning in 2018, beef beginning in 2018, and walleye filets beginning in 2021.

At the White House Tribal Nations Summit, USDA announced a new venture with the Intertribal Agriculture Council to offer technical assistance, training, and agricultural development opportunities for Tribal Nations and Tribal producers to grow their domestic marketing opportunities. Under the Department's Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative, the Office of Tribal Relations is working with the IAC American Indian Foods⁵ program to certify at least ten new Native food enterprises as Agricultural Marketing Service vendors, which will enable them to bid in procurement solicitations to provide food across USDA feeding programs.

Since 2015, USDA's Foreign Agriculture Service and the Intertribal Agriculture Council partnered through the Market Access Program, awarding \$6.1 million in promotion funding for \$183 million in products exported. In 2020, Red Lake Nation Foods exhibited at Gulfood Show in Dubai at IAC's American Indian Foods pavilion which resulted in first-time export sales. New markets for Native producers and processors allow them to bring business back home and keep resources in their communities.

Tribal Collaboration & Federal Coordination

At USDA, we acknowledge we have not done enough to provide Tribal producers, businesses, families, and communities access to the tools that can ensure economic success and self-sufficiency. At the White House Tribal Nations Summit, Secretary Vilsack announced USDA's historic commitment to expanding Tribal self-determination. USDA is taking steps to internally review our statutory authorities across all agencies and programs to determine where improvements can be made in the ways we support self-determination.

As we work to level the playing field and support Tribal sovereignty through our authorities, we also know that we do our best work when we coordinate with others. USDA recently announced and held the first meeting of an Equity Commission, which was created and funded by the American Rescue Plan and is charged with evaluating USDA programs and services and

⁵ <https://www.indianag.org/americanindianfoods>

recommending how we can reduce hurdles to accessing them. Our Office of Tribal Relations coordinates consultations with Tribal leaders in a manner intended to make it easier to meaningfully engage with USDA. We will continue to consult with Tribal leaders, agriculture producers, businesses and community members to discuss the important role food and agriculture and USDA can play in the economic resiliency of their communities and the broader areas that surround these communities.

We are working to improve coordination on Tribal issues across the federal government to deliver for Native communities. At the White House Tribal Nations Summit, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) also released a Memorandum for the Heads of Departments and Agencies regarding the incorporation of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge⁶, referred to as “ITEK”, in federal decision making. ITEK is defined as a body of observations, oral and written knowledge, practices, and beliefs that promote environmental sustainability and the responsible stewardship of natural resources through relationships between humans and environmental systems. USDA has a history of incorporating ITEK into our work. To expand our commitments, our extramural research agency (the National Institute of Food and Agriculture) incorporated ITEK as a special highlight in research grant opportunities.

The importance of coordination also extends to USDA’s partnership with Congress. Tribal Nations contribute to the economic output of many states, and each of you knows your constituents well. We rely on your input and feedback in our effort to build trusted partnerships with Tribal Nations.

Conclusion

Tribal culture, economic growth, and food security are deeply rooted in agriculture, and so the Department of Agriculture shares an outsized responsibility to support our Tribal Nations, Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians. USDA takes our responsibility seriously.

Complicated problems require complicated solutions, but USDA is eager to be a partner in driving economic growth in Native communities. It is critical that USDA support Tribes in their efforts to restore and build food and economic sovereignty, and I look forward to working with this Committee to support this mission.

⁶ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/111521-OSTP-CEQ-ITEK-Memo.pdf>