

Testimony of Wahleah Johns
Director, U.S. Department of Energy Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs

Before the

U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

March 16, 2022

On

Buy Native American: Federal Support for Native Business Capacity Building and Success

Good afternoon, Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski and Members of the Committee. My name is Wahleah Johns, a member of the Navajo Nation or Diné. It is my honor and privilege to serve at the Department of Energy (DOE or the Department), as the Director of the Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs (Office of Indian Energy). As Director, I am responsible for upholding our trust responsibilities and advancing the Office of Indian Energy's statutory responsibilities to promote tribal energy development, efficiency, and use, reduce or stabilize energy costs, enhance and strengthen tribal energy and economic infrastructure, and electrify Indian lands and homes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding tribal energy development, technical assistance, and access to markets. I am pleased to be able highlight the work that the Office of Indian Energy carries out related to these issues and how the Administration's goals will strengthen these initiatives.

The Office of Indian Energy's Mission

By statute, the Office of Indian Energy partners with federally recognized Indian tribes and Alaska Native Village and Regional Corporations to develop the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to deploy clean energy solutions. The Office of Indian Energy uses a three-pronged approach to support 574 federally recognized tribes, over 200 Alaska Native Village Corporations, and 13 Alaska Native Regional Corporations, harness their vast and undeveloped resources through: 1) financial assistance; 2), technical assistance; and, 3) education and capacity building. Today, I will focus on financial assistance, technical assistance, and the role they play relative to accessing markets.

Financial Assistance

Since 2010, the Office of Indian Energy has invested over \$114 million in more than 200 tribal energy projects. While these projects include energy planning, feasibility studies, and project development, the Office of Indian Energy emphasizes tribal energy deployment projects, projects that install hardware, and which make an immediate and tangible impact in Native communities.

Specifically, those deployment project investments have resulted in more than 43 MW of new generation, and more than 10 MWh of new battery storage, providing electricity to over 8,600 tribal buildings across the Nation. These investments have saved over \$13.7 million annually and are estimated to save over \$295 million over the life of these systems, resulting in \$3.46 saved for every DOE dollar invested.

Additionally, for larger scale projects, the Tribal Energy Loan Guarantee Program (TELGP) under DOE's Loan Programs Office is authorized to provide up to \$2 billion total in partial loan guarantees to support economic opportunities for American Indian and Alaska Native communities through energy development projects.

Technical Assistance

The Office of Indian Energy also provides federally recognized Indian tribes and Alaska Native Regional and Villages Corporations, tribal energy development organizations, and other organized tribal groups and communities, with technical assistance to advance tribal energy projects. This technical assistance is provided at no cost by the technical experts from DOE's Office of Indian Energy, DOE's national laboratories, and other partnering organizations.

The goal of this technical assistance is to address a specific challenge or fulfill a need that is essential to a specific project's successful implementation. The intended result is a tangible product or specific deliverable designed to help move a project forward.

Since 2010, the Office of Indian Energy has responded to 397 technical assistance requests in 32 States. The types of technical assistance are generally categorized into three areas: 1) technical analysis; 2) financial analysis; and, 3) strategic energy planning, with each catering to the specific needs of the community.

Access to markets

A host of factors contribute to potential challenges for Indian tribes and Alaska Native Regional and Village Corporations in accessing energy markets, including existing energy infrastructure, transmission, and funding and financing. The Office of Indian Energy works to support, develop, and strengthen the capacity that is needed to enter into energy markets. Working with these communities to support their energy visions, it is clear that many challenges exist particularly related to financing and funding projects.

Addressing these challenges is not uniform among communities. American Indian and Alaska Native communities each have varying human and financial capacities for energy development. As such, the Office of Indian Energy strives to provide services to meet the diverse needs of these communities, regardless of financial situation, geographic location or demographic circumstances. For example, strategic energy planning assistance is often a way communities engage with our office. Knowing the financial, technical, and legal ramifications can be critical for a community that is considering energy development. Other communities may be considering large scale energy development and have more specific requests from our network of experts.

Further, the newly signed Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) will better position DOE to address the climate and environmental

needs of the American people. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law makes a historic investment in infrastructure —more than \$62 billion for DOE to deliver a more equitable clean energy future —which will help correct the unacceptable fact that many in Indian Country still don't have access to reliable, affordable electricity. For example, funds were made available specifically to Indian tribes for energy efficiency and conservation and preventing outages and enhancing resilience of the electric grid. Lastly, this historic investment in supply chains and clean energy demonstration projects will create jobs and economic opportunity for all Americans, including American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

The Administration and DOE's push to promote zero carbon projects to combat the climate crisis will create new investment, new jobs and stronger communities, and we're making sure that American Indian and Alaska Native communities are in the forefront of this effort.

This is why the Office of Indian Energy is investing in clean energy projects Native communities, projects that create jobs and boost energy independence and resilience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many Native people today still live without electricity, or are dependent on fossil fuels for their energy needs – energy that is essential to provide Native people with light for their children to study by, refrigeration to keep food and medicine cold, heat to keep them warm, and energy to help their communities grow.

These realities and unmet needs are not congruent with the vast untapped energy resources that exist on Native lands. Tellingly, American Indian and Alaska Native communities' interest and action in developing these resources have increased in recent decades. Like many communities in the United States, Native communities are working towards strengthening their economies and increasing their well-being and energy development is a foundational element to achieving these goals.

We know the demand is there. DOE's Office of Indian Energy's investments continue to be utilized by American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Annually and cumulatively, there is growing unmet need for project grant funding and technical expertise to address the wide range of challenges to energy development in these communities. There is also a stark increase in education needs and outreach participation and the need for building internal capacity.

The Office of Indian Energy's initiatives are guided by statute and informed by tribal input, that is so essential to building and maintaining Nation-to-Nation relationships. Feedback is received through consultation, listening sessions, workshops, research, from this Committee, and recommendations from the Indian Country Energy and Infrastructure Working Group (ICEIWG). This feedback is vital to ensuring that the direction of the DOE Office of Indian Energy addresses the present day needs and realities of American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Therefore, the Office of Indian Energy must be receptive, adaptive, and forward thinking to best prepare to meet the evolving needs of these communities.

We want to create more opportunity for dialogue about how Indian tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and Native communities can lead the way to a clean, secure, and reliable energy future. We are striving to ensure that matters associated with broadband, transportation, water

and energy in American Indian and Alaska Native communities are also highlighted and addressed.

On behalf of DOE's Office of Indian Energy, thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today. I appreciate the ongoing bipartisan support for the development of energy resources in Native communities.

I welcome your questions.