

Written Testimony of Diane Cullo
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before the
United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing on “Breaking New Ground in Agribusiness Opportunities in Indian
Country”

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Good afternoon Chairman Hoeven, Ranking Member Udall, and Members of the Committee. My name is Diane Cullo and I am the Director of the Office of Partnerships & Public Engagement (OPPE) and an Advisor to the Secretary at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Prior to joining USDA, I served as Executive Director for the White House Initiative on Tribal Colleges and Universities, as well as at the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, so the issues regarding access and education across Indian Country are close to my heart.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on how USDA is addressing new agribusiness opportunities for tribal nations and citizens. Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Udall, thank you for your leadership and for highlighting the need to support new agricultural economic enterprises in Indian Country.

Based on 2012 Census of Agriculture data, we know that the average reported age of Native agricultural operators is 58 years old. A study by the National Congress of American Indians reports that over a third of the Native population is under the age of 18. There is a rising Native youth bubble that USDA is poised to help address, so that Native American agriculture continues to thrive. I had the pleasure of interacting with many young tribal members in attendance at the Intertribal Agriculture Council’s annual meeting this past December. Native youth are part of the future of American agribusiness. I look forward to working with the Committee on identifying areas in which we can provide more support and help to not only feed our population, but create a sustainable livelihood for Native youth.

We also know that by 2020, 39 percent of new openings in the agriculture, food, and natural resources sector may not be filled by graduates with those degrees. That is nearly 23,000 jobs nation-wide not only in farming, but also in STEM and bio-materials production, communication, government, and education. One of the ways USDA is actively addressing this is through a cooperative agreement with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium. We are supporting the Consortium’s efforts to develop career-ready curriculum for tribal colleges and universities. This partnership is still early, and USDA is continuing to explore other opportunities for collaboration with Native- and non-Native youth serving organizations, such as internship opportunities and targeted resources.

One of Secretary Perdue’s highest priorities is to enhance USDA’s customer service, and I am pleased to report that USDA programs are helping bridge need with opportunity. Through its Rural Business Development Grant program, Rural Development awarded over \$520,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2017 to Native projects, helping support jobs in agribusiness and fortifying those economic markets in their communities. Those projects included forestry, establishing a

greenhouse incubator, providing technical assistance for tribal producers, and developing a commercial market for local, tribally produced foods.

Furthermore, through USDA's network of boots on the ground in the Farm Service Agency, Native farmers and ranchers received over \$29 million in financing to support their own operations since September 2017. Of that total, more than half- which is over \$15 million – directly supported Native producers becoming owner-operators of farms, expanding current operations, increasing agricultural productivity, and assisting with land tenure. Equally worth noting, the Farm Service Agency lent more than \$250,000 to youth aged 10-20 to finance income-producing, agriculture-related projects, up to \$5,000 each. These Native youth now have the opportunity to see exactly what they can do with their own hands.

USDA is committed to establishing a network of lasting success. Agricultural operations are ultimately business endeavors and, as such, they take time, capital, and energy to ensure their production model thrives. USDA welcomes the opportunity to work with this Committee to attain our mutual goal of increasing the number of current and future Native producers in Indian Country.

We are also appreciative of our tribal partners who continue to broaden the footprint of agriculture across Indian Country. Last year, the Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma announced the grand opening of the first tribal-owned and -operated meat slaughter facility in the country. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service actively consulted with Quapaw to ensure a full understanding of USDA regulatory requirements, informing the Tribe's decision to operate as a federally-inspected facility. Under Chairman Berrey's leadership, the Tribe is taking it a step further, serving as a resource for other tribes interested in establishing their own facility.

Other tribes have met with us and expressed interest in pursuing similar ventures in other areas of production, such as seafood. As of last week – January 11th – KivaSun Foods, in partnership with Odyssey Foods, a seafood processing and distribution company based in Seattle, Washington, was approved to participate in the Agricultural Marketing Service Salmon Products Program, specifically for salmon fillets destined for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. There is currently a solicitation out for 12 loads – which comes out to 432,000 pounds – of salmon fillets. KivaSun is a Native-owned food company that reintroduced traditional foods to tribal communities in the form of bison and wild pacific salmon. This is a shining example of a Native-owned enterprise working with a USDA program that supports feeding families in Indian Country.

Additionally, USDA's ongoing partnership with the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) is expanding agricultural market access for tribal producers through two courses, amongst others. First, USDA has a cooperative agreement with IAC to provide technical assistance on land-management practices and to help interested producers navigate through the diverse array of USDA programs and services available to meet their needs. Second, USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service has regularly awarded IAC under the Market Access Program, or MAP. In FY 2018, the IAC received \$737,270 in MAP funds to promote products and secure export sales of American Indian and Alaska Native agriculture and food products. Under IAC's American Indian Foods program, USDA saw combined on-sites sales of \$8.2 million (and estimated 12-month sales of \$12 million) at trade shows around the world in FY 2016.

On Secretary Perdue's first day in office in April 2017, President Trump called on USDA to lead a concerted effort identifying issues important to rural and agricultural prosperity. This led directly to the Report to the President from the Task Force on Rural Prosperity. We will continue seeking to identify these barriers and support their resolution. A copy of the report is posted online at www.usda.gov/ruralprosperity.

Within Deputy Secretary Censky's first 10 days in office, he met with Tribal Leaders at NCAI to consult on the Secretary's intended reorganization of USDA, and just last month, one of our Acting Under Secretaries consulted with Tribal Leaders to identify how we can come together in improving the USDA food package. One of the important points of discussion was how USDA can work with tribal agribusinesses to include their food in the package that feeds so many Native families. The KivaSun foods example I previously mentioned is one small step in that direction.

With an upcoming Farm Bill on the horizon, we look forward to working collectively with Indian Country. I would like to take this opportunity to announce that Secretary Perdue and the U.S. Department of Agriculture will hold a Tribal Consultation on the 2018 Farm Bill in Oklahoma in April.

In the short month following Secretary Perdue's appointment to USDA, he fulfilled his promise to meet with tribes. When he visited Oglala Lakota College to hear from Tribal Leaders and Tribal College Presidents on how we can leverage our resources, he walked away from that meeting affirming that USDA is here to partner with Indian Country, and I echo that sentiment. I would like to thank the Committee for your time and look forward to any questions you may have.