



Senate Committee on Indian Affairs – Hearing on Tribal Priorities for the new Congress

Leonard Forsman: Chairman of the Suquamish Tribe of Washington; President of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians; and Co-chair of the Climate Action Task Force, National Congress of American Indians

Tribal Nations in the US are among the frontline communities feeling the full force of the climate crisis. We are already experiencing significant climate impacts that affect our rights as sovereign Nations, our access to our usual and accustomed places, our traditional lifeways, and our livelihoods. Our peoples have lived on our traditional lands since time immemorial, but our elders are being forced to move from their homes because they are experiencing more extensive flooding. More of our children have been inflicted with respiratory illness and have difficulty breathing during recent wildfire seasons, which are worse than ever before. And our traditional first foods, including clams, crabs, and fisheries are threatened by our acidifying oceans. The Suquamish Tribe and our ancestors have always had a sacred relationship with the Southern resident killer whale population in the Puget Sound, but they are starving because of the drastic reduction in our salmon runs. These reductions are strongly correlated with climate impacts and with the presence of dams on the Snake River. The inequities and injustices that the citizens of Tribal Nations in the US have experienced in the last 500 years are being amplified by the climate and the US government has a Trust Responsibility to tackle this issue immediately and moving forward.

There are Tribes throughout the United States that are at the forefront of taking action on climate change. For example,

- To adapt to ocean acidification, [the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community](#) is reviving ancient clam gardens to improve nearshore habitat and give tribal members more opportunities to harvest traditional foods.
- The [Blue Lake Rancheria](#) has constructed an electrical microgrid on its 100-acre reservation, which is part of the Tribes' transition to a zero-carbon community.
- The Navajo Nation is working to increase renewable energy -- the [Kayenta Solar Plant](#) now supplies energy to 36,000 homes on the Navajo Nation.
- Numerous Native communities in Alaska, coastal Louisiana, and Washington State are developing plans for relocating and protecting their existing infrastructure in response to rising seas.

The 4th National Climate Assessment, published in 2018, includes a dedicated chapter on [Tribes and Indigenous Peoples](#). The Key Messages in the chapter are:

1. Climate change threatens Indigenous peoples' livelihoods and economies.
2. The health of Tribal individuals and communities will be uniquely challenged by climate impacts, which threaten the natural resources that we depend upon, our cultural heritages, identities, and physical and mental health.
3. Institutional barriers limit our access to traditional territory and resources and also preclude us from engaging in Federal policies and programs and accessing adequate funding.

In autumn 2020, in a Tribally led review of the US House's 2020 [Congressional Climate Action Plan \(CAP\)](#). The [Tribal Review](#) identifies key Tribal priorities that include:

- [Invest in Tribal infrastructure to build a just, equitable, and resilient clean energy economy](#);
- [Support climate-resilient Tribal communities](#) by upholding the Federal Trust Responsibility;
- [Promote environmental justice and health of Tribes while upholding Tribal sovereignty](#);
- [Restore ecological resilience](#) and maintain Tribal access to first foods and other cultural resources;
- [Honor the rights of Indigenous Peoples in climate governance and climate science by honoring](#) the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In May 2020, upon request from the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Interior, the BIA Tribal Resilience Program [assessed the unmet infrastructure needs of Tribal Nations for addressing climatic threats](#). The report identified a significant unmet financial need for existing tribal infrastructure threatened by climate that includes:

- \$3.45 billion over the next 50 years for Alaska which equates to \$90 - \$110 million in the first 10 years to address tribal infrastructure threats;
- \$1.9 billion for Tribes in the Contiguous 48 States. This represents a known *underestimate* of the total Needs (\$462 million for Planning and \$1.45 billion for implementation projects).

In conclusion, to fully accomplish our climate-related goals, the United States must ensure that frontline communities have the resources that they need to address the inequitable climate impacts that we are facing. Federal funding from BIA's Tribal Resilience Program is critical for Tribes seeking to plan and implement climate adaptation strategies. In FY 2022, funding for the BIA Tribal Resilience Program should be increased to \$50 million. In addition, \$150 million should be allocated to agencies such as FEMA, the USACE, and NOAA and committed to protecting or relocating existing tribal infrastructure (including cultural sites) threatened by climate.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony and ATNI stands prepared to assist the US Senate Indian Affairs Committee in future hearings to address climate impacts and solutions on behalf of Tribal Nations.

Sincerely,

Leonard Forsman
Chairman, Suquamish Tribe of Washington
President, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians
Co-chair, Climate Action Task Force, National Congress of American Indians