



# MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE

*Executive Branch of Tribal Government*

TESTIMONY OF THE  
HONORABLE MELANIE BENJAMIN  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
MILLE LACS BAND OF OJIBWE

before the

SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS

field hearing on

INVESTING IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES: TRANSFORMATIVE OPPORTUNITIES  
IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND JOBS ACT

June 28, 2022  
Prior Lake, MN

Aaniin, Boozhoo (Greetings in Ojibwe). Good Morning, Senator Smith and Members of the Committee. My name is Melanie Benjamin and I am the Chief Executive of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. We have three districts in east-central Minnesota: District I is located on the shores of Mille Lacs Lake; District II is located near McGregor, Minnesota; and, District III is located near Hinckley, Minnesota.

Miigwech (thank you in Ojibwe) for this opportunity to testify on how federal infrastructure investment can best support the restoration of our Native homelands.

Our Mille Lacs Reservation was established by the 1855 Treaty with the Chippewa, which set aside more than 61,000 acres along Lake Mille Lacs for the Mille Lacs Band. In the decades that followed, our ancestors refused to yield to the federal and non-Indian pressures trying to force them to abandon our Reservation homelands. Even when our Reservation homes were burned down, our villages flattened, our timber cut down and stolen, and our agriculture and other property destroyed, our ancestors stood their ground. As a result, we became known as the Non-Removable Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

As we today look at the promise of federal investment in our Reservation infrastructure, we must acknowledge that, for far too long, railroads and other infrastructure investments were a one-

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way street that facilitated the theft of our Reservation resources. As a few members of this Senate Committee on Indian Affairs noted in a report in 1900, 122 years ago: "Out of the tangle of verbiage of which treaties, laws, and rulings are composed[,] the Indians of the Mille Lac Reservation are able only to realize that somewhere in their dealings with the white race bad faith has been extended to them."

Today, the Mille Lacs Band is committed to partnering with the federal government to change this; we need to make federal infrastructure investment in and around our Reservation a two-way street for the mutual benefit of the Mille Lacs Band and our neighbors. I want to describe several projects we hope will soon be turned into reality in our Reservation Tribal communities.

### Isle Water/Sewer Extension Project

In the last two decades, the Town of Isle, which is within our Mille Lacs Reservation, has secured federal and state infrastructure funding to build and rebuild its municipal water and sewer system. Unfortunately, the Town's plan, and the federal and state funding for it, completely bypassed a Tribal neighborhood in Isle populated mostly by Band member households. In a time when environmental justice is in the spotlight, this was extremely disappointing. Many Band members continue to rely on well water as their primary source of drinking water and this critical water source has at times been compromised by septic system and groundwater contamination, posing significant health and safety risks to our community.

Consequently, the Mille Lacs Band has requested congressionally directed spending for a special, Mille Lacs Band Isle Water Extension Project that will construct a water and wastewater system to connect the existing Isle municipal system with our Tribal neighborhood in Isle.

The Band's Project will connect approximately 85 Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDUs) near the intersection of Minnesota State Highways 27 and 47 east of Highway 169. Our project is currently in the design phase but will be ready to build in 2023 if funded in FY 2023. It supports the goals of the Safe Drinking Water Act by ensuring the responsible and sustainable development of water and wastewater infrastructure, both of which are essential for Band members and non-Indians who reside within the City of Isle and must otherwise rely on shallow wells for drinking water. It also supports the Clean Water Act by protecting Mille Lacs Lake, one of the largest and most popular trophy fishing lakes in Minnesota that also contains valuable, treaty-protected fish and water assets held in federal trust for the Band. It will relieve pressure on lake ecosystems created by recent lakeshore development and will enhance public health by protecting drinking water from septic system and groundwater contamination.

The Band's Isle Water Extension Project is a \$5,307,000 project, for which the Band is requesting \$4,245,000 in FY 2023 congressionally-directed spending to add to the Band's 20% matching contribution. Miigwech to you, Senator Smith, for joining with Senator Klobuchar in supporting our FY 2023 request for congressionally-directed spending. We hope your colleagues in the Senate and House will agree with you that this modern-day miscarriage of environmental justice must be quickly rectified.

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## Pine County Broadband Project

Since the Band and its neighbors share some rural areas that have been chronically under-served by communications infrastructure, the Band joined with Pine County in requesting FY 2022 congressionally directed spending to expand broadband service into more remote areas of Pine County where over 4,800 people live and where hundreds more visit and work at St. Croix State Park, St. Croix State Forest, the Band's Pine Grove Academy, the Band's Health and Human Services facility, and many other small businesses and resort communities. We were quite pleased when Congress agreed to fund our FY 2022 request as supported by Senators Smith and Klobuchar, in the amount of \$5,576,250. Miigwech for your leadership on this, Senator Smith. As a result, in the next two or so years, many of our Band members in Pine County will gain access to affordable, reliable and high-speed fiber broadband service for innovative telehealth services, remote work, educational opportunities, and economic and social connections.

## Tribal Economy Business Incubator Project

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated Tribal communities across America and revealed to a broader audience the weakness of Indian Country economies. Decades of underdevelopment have created outsized consequences and disparities within Tribal communities.

In our region, studies show that public administration is the only growing base industry sector. There is widespread interest in increased entrepreneurship and in growing the number of locally owned businesses and creating paths for start-up success. This takes facility space and communications infrastructure, both of which we lack on our Reservation.

In response last year, the Band requested \$1.3 million in FY 2022 congressionally directed spending to renovate and construct a business incubator building in Hinckley to enable the creation of new businesses, build wealth, help establish a robust entrepreneur ecosystem, create greater industry diversity within the Mille Lacs tribal economy, and help historically underrepresented persons build wealth and better participate in the broader economy. This infrastructure resource is reducing barriers to entrepreneurship, boosting the economic and social wellbeing of the region, particularly for Mille Lacs Band members, and supporting the ongoing development of our community as a whole.

We were so pleased earlier this year when Congress appropriated \$1.3 million in the FY 2022 budget to fund the request made by Senators Smith and Klobuchar in support of our Tribal Economy Business Incubator Project, to which the Band contributed an additional \$822,300. We are eager to see the return on these investments. Miigwech to you, Senator Smith, for making this possible.

## Tamarack Talon Mine

I will close with a word of caution. The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe works very hard to be a progressive government. We believe in finding new and innovative ways of making progress for our people and surrounding communities. We need our Reservation infrastructure to catch up to the rest

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of America. As the original environmentalists, we welcome the growing concern about the environment and how to best battle climate change caused by human activity.

However, plans that some might define as “progress” can literally overrun a way of life and a culture. We saw it with the railroads that crisscrossed our hunting and fishing grounds, disrupting our way of life. We saw it with toxic air and water pollution from exploding transportation, farming, manufacturing, and electrical power production. And in our Great Lakes region, we've seen it from non-ferrous mining of minerals and precious metals.

Our challenge today is that we are finding we must battle to preserve our environment here at home because it is being treated as mere collateral damage that others are ready to sacrifice in their effort to battle climate change and pursue greater economic development. I speak of the proposed nickel-cobalt mine in Tamarack, Minnesota. That mine is to be located within a mile or two of the Mille Lacs Band lands and the homes of our Tribal members in District II. It is being promoted as a way to fuel electric vehicles which are seen as a “silver bullet” that might slow down climate change. The batteries for these cars currently require nickel. And there are only a handful of known places in the United States where nickel has been found -- right where our precious water, fish and wild rice have sustained our culture and people for generations.

The process of removing nickel from the earth is one of the most toxic and dangerous forms of mining in existence. Nickel mining has a 100% track record of polluting the environment. This Talon Mine project is being watched around the world. There is very strong pressure from federal, state, industry and international interests to get that nickel out of the earth. Our water, fish and wild rice -- our way of life -- are all in the way.

As Anishinaabe, it is our sacred duty to take care of the gifts the Creator gave us. The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe wants to be part of the solution to climate change. But we will not jeopardize the safety and welfare of our people ... our drinking water ... our lands ... and our resources ... to solve a problem we did not cause. Infrastructure development must not sacrifice indigenous rights.

As the Mille Lacs Band government, we will do whatever is necessary to protect our environment and cultural resources ... because like our language ... they are critical to our identity. Along with being caretakers of our language and culture, being caretakers of the earth is who we are. We ask that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs assist us in ensuring that infrastructure development does not destroy us and our way of life.

### Conclusion

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided an emergency-scale infusion of federal funding and authority to Indian Country. The Mille Lacs Band strongly supported its enactment and is actively engaged in helping federal agencies to implement it effectively. There is a stunning amount of backlogged need on our Reservation and throughout Indian Country. Overcrowded, remote and aging buildings demand replacement. All-weather transportation facilities are critically needed for year-round public safety, education, jobs, and commerce. Green energy networks must be adapted and extended to rural, remote Tribal community locations. Antiquated communications

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systems on Reservations must be brought into the 21st century. New water and sanitation systems are essential for our health and the health of the environmental resources held for us and future generations by our trustee -- the United States government.

Isolated Tribal communities from rural Minnesota to villages in Alaska deserve a better chance of connecting to the health, educational, employment and market resources enjoyed by the rest of America. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is a promising, good start on the path to better opportunities for Tribal communities. It is now up to us to run this race to catch up to the rest of America. We have made great progress in recent decades but we have much, much more to do.

Miigwech, Senator Smith, for holding this hearing in Indian Country and for your support of our initiatives. We look forward to our continued partnership with the Committee to ensure that our tribal communities have equitable access to infrastructure resources and equitable justice in protecting our environment and resources.

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