USDA TRIBAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
February 18, 2025

The Tribal Advisory Committee was convened for its meeting at approximately 12:00 P.M. Eastern Time on February 18, 2025, via Zoom webinar.

In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public from approximately 12:00 P.M. Eastern Standard Time to approximately 7:00 P.M.

Council Members Present:

Meagen Baldy, Committee Vice Chair
William Barquin
President Whitney Gravelle, Bay Mills Indian Community
Trenton Kissee, Committee Chair
Whitney Sawney
Kelsey Scott
Glenn Teves

Council Members absent:

Ben Jacobs
Council Member David Pourier, Oglala Sioux Tribe

Staff of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) attending were:

Betsy Rakola, Acting Director
Josiah Griffin, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
Christian Jones, Program Analyst
Elena Krajeski, Administrative Officer

Other staff of USDA attending were:

Dominic Restuccia, White House Liaison
Kayleigh Hurley, Deputy White House Liaison

Staff of the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) attending were:

Carla Clark, Division Chief, Office of Trust Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Chair Kissee opened the meeting by requesting a moment of silence for the passing of TAC committee member and President of Dine' Community College, Dr. Charles (Monty) Roessel.

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

Committee members considered and approved the agenda without amendment.

ADOPTION OF THE DECEMBER 2024 MEETING MINUTES

Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee unanimously adopted meeting minutes of the December 2024 TAC meeting.

DISCUSSION ON TAC REFLECTION AND MEMBER GOALS

Lessons Learned from Calendar Year (CY) 2024. Committee Chair Kissee affirmed that the TAC's work over 2024 is being recognized broadly, including by representatives of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. The Committee Chair further acknowledged that previous recommendations and future deliberation aim to promote availability of healthy, safe food for Tribal communities. Committee Chair Kissee commented that these priorities represent rural America and how farm policies can help everyone. Committee members generally agreed that there is more accomplish in 2025 and that drafting an annual report prior to the December meeting may be a helpful practice.

Membership Priorities for CY 2025. Committee Member Barquin recognized that some members are appointed for two-year terms and expressed desire to focus on achievable outcomes during 2025. Through this approach, Committee Member Barquin also recognized USDA serves a broad mission, and this work takes time.

Committee Member Teves added, that with Committee member Roessel passing, the TAC should prioritize supporting Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCU) staff and resource capacity. Committee Member Sawney echoed these comments, adding that aligning with USDA's priorities to support rural areas and Tribal communities through extension services is key.

Committee Member Gravelle noted that the TAC should consider implementation strategies following last year's focus on understanding USDA authorities. Where USDA changes policy, she further reflected that these changes should be communicated effectively to state and local USDA staff.

Committee Member Scott expressed desire to highlight how programs can support self-sufficiency in Tribal and rural economies.

Committee Member Linnell identified that operating in Alaska requires unique considerations. She expressed that when 95 percent of goods are imported into the state, right-sizing pay schedules in conservation programs is critical. Although hunting

and subsistence season requires additional time commitments, Committee Member Linnell expressed gratitude for TAC leadership and a dedication to continue working with TAC members. In closing, she encouraged the TAC to host regional meetings and invite representation from those regions to attend. Chair Kissee stated that the TAC will be focusing more of their future recommendations that involve Hawaii and Alaska. He went on to say that the program implementation for those two states will be a priority this year as well.
Vice Chair Baldy agreed with previously identified TAC member priorities and that the annual report should be drafted prior to the TAC December 2025 meeting.

SUBCOMMITTEE UPDATES

NOTE: This section identifies Committee Members in relation to their Subcommittee leadership role.

Committee Administration Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Kissee expressed desire to keep the same subcommittee structure from last year. Chair Kissee reiterated that subcommittees are to gather information for recommendations and identify whether a topic requires congressional or agency action. Committee Member Barquin suggested that, considering the number of recommendations presented in 2024, the TAC may benefit from providing increased specificity. In one example, the TAC raised waiving match requirements but did not clarify specific programs beneficial to Indian Country. Discussion suggested that greater specificity allows for more direct recommendation progress tracking, recognizing the TAC must make additional efforts to gather information.

Where committee members receive requests for public engagement in their capacity as a TAC member, Chair Kissee reminded the TAC that all public speaking engagements must be cleared by USDA first per TAC by-laws.

Economic Development Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Scott reported on their January meeting. This subcommittee meeting discussed tracking interest from across rural America, including other Tribal and non-Tribal priorities. In addition to prioritizing 2024 recommendation progress, the subcommittee discussed opportunities for storytelling and policy impacts that align with the new administration's priorities.

Education and Research Subcommittee. Subcommittee Co-Chair Sawney reflected on their January subcommittee meeting. During that meeting, the subcommittee discussed recommendations from last year's report and a desire to focus on Census of Agriculture surveying and Tribal College and University investments critical for advancing the next generation of agricultural leaders. Subcommittee Co-Chair Teves added that the TAC should consider advancing agriculture opportunities for kindergarten through 12th grade since the average age for farmers is over 60. Committee Chair Kissee affirmed that while many tribes have 4-H within their communities, many other tribes do not. He acknowledged that expanding opportunities for these youth will be helpful.

Ranching, Farm Production, and Conservation Subcommittee. Committee Chair Kissee opened discussion by acknowledging an ongoing federal focus on regenerative agriculture and that many Tribes/Tribal producers engage in such practices. Committee Member Linnell encouraged the TAC to consider how USDA could better prioritize sustainable food production practices, including in fisheries. While Committee Chair Kissee suggested the TAC could benefit from discussion with (Tribal) fisheries directly, he encouraged the TAC to be mindful of invitations and to ensure such invitations are in line with USDA processes.

Subcommittee Chair Scott reflected on January meeting review of Tribal and non-Tribal priorities, including other agricultural interest groups. These discussions raised need to support no-cost legislative proposals and opportunities to help producers expand their markets. Committee Member Teves added that these elements could benefit from increased access to (cooperative) extension services. Committee Chair Kissee further stated that unpredictable weather greatly affects agriculture producers, and the TAC could benefit from reviewing indemnity and disaster programs for these producers.

Food, Food Safety, and Trade Subcommittee.
Subcommittee Chair Baldy emphasized desire to prioritize previous recommendations and that some Tribes may be ready to administer food safety oversight and inspection. Committee Member Teves presented that the Education and Research Subcommittee may have interest in commenting on opportunities for USDA to advance training for local/tribal food inspection.

Discussion reflected that one recommendation carried by the TAC in its December 2024 meeting was not included in their annual report: *USDA should continue promoting domestic market access for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian foods.* Subcommittee Chair Baldy affirmed that this recommendation should be included in the TAC workplan for 2025. Committee Chair Kissee stated that ongoing conversations with Congressional offices on fulfilling TAC recommendations. While TAC members had a clear vision in mind with each recommendation, external conversations suggest greater specificity may be helpful.

During conversation, multiple committee members suggested that understanding fisheries interest in relation to USDA authority may be helpful. Fish, such as salmon, are traditional foods important to tribal diets and may be the only locally sourced protein available.

Forest and Public Lands Management Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Barquin requested the rotation of TAC subcommittees change so the Forest and Public Lands Subcommittee is not always listed last. He shared that having the meeting at an earlier time may allow for increased participation.

In reflecting on the discussion during the January subcommittee meeting, Subcommittee Chair Barquin stated an interest in prioritizing co-management/co-stewardship strategies and implementation. One area where these federal-tribal partnerships could be streamlined is standardizing language across all federal agencies. Committee Chair Kissee shared that Senate Committee on Indian Affairs staff presented questions specific to this subcommittee.

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS (BIA) DISCUSSION

With the meeting running ahead of schedule, TAC members requested to bring the BIA discussion earlier in the agenda. Chair Kissee stated that leasing and Agricultural Resource Management Plans (ARMPs) are 'hot topics' in Indian Country. While this TAC's deliberation must focus on USDA authorities due to its statutory authority, the TAC has begun exploration for how USDA programs can supplement ARMP development.

Another area where USDA and DOI interests align are in fire resilience, in conservation planning, and in the administration of P.L. 93-638 (638) programming. While the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service can help Tribal interests develop conservation plans, these plans may require BIA approval. Committee Scott acknowledged hearing inconsistency in where BIA staff may or may not require approval for Tribal activity across regions, suggesting this topic may be ripe for TAC deliberation. Given USDA's more recent authorization in 638/demonstration projects, TAC members proposed that hearing from DOI Office of Self Governance may be helpful. TAC members discussed that staffing levels and changes may complicate program implementation and staff availability.

Committee Member Barquin proposed another area of interagency collaboration in forest management. Under the National Indian Forest (Resources) Management Act, the BIA is required to approve forest management plans on reservations. The USDA Forest Service may be a helpful partner for Tribes in developing these plans, including in fuels management and cultural burns. Committee Member Teves suggested this topic could include mitigating invasive species and related biocontrol.

TAC members questioned the level of BIA engagement in fisheries, Alaska, and Hawai'i. Committee Member Linnell responded that because Alaska Native Villages largely lack Trust land, BIA staff have narrower involvement in Tribal activity. BIA does sit on the Federal Subsistence Board with a vote on regulations. This collaboration with USDA on the Federal Subsistence Board recently added three Tribal seats. For Hawai'i, Committee Member Teves noted that Hawaiian Home Land, like to Indian trust land, is managed by the Department of Hawaiian Homelands in the state government, with DOI coordination.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

DFO Griffin opened the public comment period at 3:00 P.M. Eastern Time by framing this period as an opportunity for the public to inform Tribal Advisory Committee's

workplan. In these remarks, he stated that as this public comment period was directed to Committee members and not to federal agencies, members of the public may not expect discussion with agency staff. Additionally, the DFO instructed that TAC members may ask clarifying questions but may not seek discussion with commenters in this period.

NOTE: This section paraphrases comments and does not reflect verbatim remarks from any commenter.

Carly Griffith Hotvedt, Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative. The opportunity for USDA to receive and reflect TAC recommendations is an important component of the federal trust obligation. USDA has not published the tribal consultation manual referenced in its department regulation on consultation.

Cassie Moses, San Carlos Apache Tribe. The pause on federal funding and hiring impacts the San Carlos Apache Tribe's farm and forestry operations. The Tribe relied on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding under the Inflation Reduction Act for forest and wood residue treatment. The forest project was near completion, but USDA has frozen payment.

Harold Frazier, Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association. Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program implementation hinders producer access to other USDA programs. Referring to a commodity purchase program, Mr. Frazier questioned whether any other grants were available for food purchases.

Committee members raised concern about availability of funding for USDA programs and shared that Tribes may purchase food through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. The DFO reminded TAC members to reserve public comment for feedback and to only ask clarifying questions of commenters.

Hannah Stinson, Alliance for Green Heat. The Alliance for Green Heat administers government programs reducing hazardous fuels. Ms. Stinson questioned whether such funds would be available in the foreseeable future.

Letkwu Moore Stranger, **Student.** The 1994 Tribal Scholars program was a great program but has been terminated.

Monica Rattling Hawk, World Wildlife Fund. The TAC should unfreeze the approximately $70 million Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds awarded to the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC).

Where farmers receive 15 cents on each dollar spent on food, Indian Country is missing out on 85 percent of the supply chain. The TAC should seek additional assistance for tribal supply chains, including $100 million for the Indigenous Animals Grant. Buffalo are a keystone species domestically and important protein for tribal self-sufficiency. A recent USDA study shows that 85% of cattle process are owned by foreign companies. Tribes

are domestic owners and can serve as anchors for expanding meat processing domestically. back into the cattle industry. USDA should also set aside an additional $100 million for tribal Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) agreements, expand the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservation self-determination pilot and tribal buffalo purchase provision, and remove any state policy impediments for selling buffalo into the school meal program.

Samuel Velasquez, Tunica Biloxi Nation. USDA placed a freeze on the Tribe's $600,000 LFPA agreement awarded until October 2025. This hold leaves Tribal operations and vendors, including veteran producers, in a 'stand still.' This program helps small and mid-sized producers in a way that USDA has not previously done, and this program should continue.

Willie Gray Eyes, Navajo Nation. Navajo Nation has a memorandum of understanding and an active soil/water conservation district. A USDA [service center] has been closed for several years, which should be reopened. The surrounding area for Navajo Nation is at high risk for wildfire due to a large amount of dead undergrowth. Mr. Gray Eyes requested to speak with someone on wildfire mitigation.

Bonnie Scheele, University of Alaska Fairbanks Northwest Campus High Latitude Management. Recognizing tribal food codes through new 638 program flexibility would support commercial grade, USDA-level tribal meat inspection. Providing commercial grade meat products is key for the people in Alaska. Local protein for many Alaska Native Villages comes from the tundra, including 20 herds of reindeer.

Dion Killsback, Coalition of Large Tribes. The Coalition for Large Tribes (COLT) represents 20 Indian Nations spanning over one million acres. COLT requests USDA unfreeze buffalo agreements totaling nearly $70 million in obligated Inflation Reduction Act funding. These projects provide fencing, fire mitigation, grassland management and water development. Within these funds includes approximately $5 million obligated through the Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities Program. The InterTribal Buffalo Council hired staff for these projects and has made expenditures based on this agreement. Additionally, USDA should release a similar order to the Department of the Interior recognizing Tribes as distinct from Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility determinations, and federal Tribal programming should be exempt from mass workforce reductions. Committee Member Barquin questioned if grasslands management projects are in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service, to which Mr. Killsback responded that he believes so.

Buck Jones, Columbia River InterTribal Fish Commission. The Columbia River InterTribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) represents several Tribes in the Pacific Northwest. USDA recently funded cold storage and meat processing facilities for bison and cattle. The TAC should consider cold storage and processing facilities for fish and salmon for commercial and subsistence purposes. Additionally, the Local Food Purchase Assistance program benefits Tribes, recognizing some other programs may be too massive for Tribes to fully participate. Supporting access to traditional foods is

more ideal for Tribes than making large-scale commercial products with little connection to Indian Country available.

Jason Baldes, Eastern Shoshone Tribe/InterTribal Agriculture Council. ITBC represents 86 member Tribes in buffalo restoration efforts spanning across 20 states for over 30 years. As a Section 17 Corporation, ITBC holds a similar tribal status to its member tribes. ITBC recently received Regional Conservation Partnership Program and Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities Program awards which have been frozen. Since these programs operate on a reimbursable basis and ITBC has already expended funds, ITBC and its member Tribes are suffering at loss. Mr. Baldes expressed concern about what trust responsibility that we will see under this administration. Buffalo is an important traditional food, and the availability of buffalo in (Tribal) diets has a direct relationship on reducing diabetes in Indian Country.

DELIBERATION ON TAC WORKPLAN FOR CY25

Reflection on Public Comments. Chair Kissee requested TAC members identify elements from the public comments of interest to the Committee.

Committee Member Teves acknowledged the need to address growing diabetes rates in Indian country, how Tribes are affected by rising food prices, and how several programs are being impacted by funds being frozen. Committee Member Teves proposed changing the definition of “food desert” to recognize distance between consumers and the point of food origin, e.g., over 90 percent of food eaten in Hawai‘i must travel over 2,000 miles before it gets to grocery stores.

Committee Member Barquin mentioned that some public comments mentioned waiting for the release of the departmental manual on Tribal consultation. He discussed how this department manual may inform how USDA manages its trust responsibility. Additionally, he reflected on the number of comments on food sovereignty that deserve further deliberation.

Committee Member Gravelle commented on the effect a freeze on grant and agreement payments is having on tribal programs, and suggested USDA should better communicate with Indian Country about these budget freezes and funding updates.

Committee Member Linnell pointed out that many Tribal liaison employees have been terminated and the effect of not staffing these positions on Indian Country. The Natural Resources Conservation Service office in Alaska has tried recruiting a state-level Tribal liaison for two years and had successfully hired a liaison two months of this meeting. Committee Member Linnell expressed concern on whether this person will be fired due to terminations of probationary employees. When continuity of these positions is sporadic, she noted, getting Tribal liaisons in place and retaining them is important. Chair Kissee requested, since the Secretary has been confirmed, to better understand any new process for public comment or consultation on these topics.

Committee Member Scott reflected on the number of public comments from entities and organizations affected by federal policy and a desire for this TAC to retain a broad focus.

Development of Focus Area for CY25. Chair Kissee opened discussion on the TAC's workplan by focusing on food security and food sovereignty which includes grassland health, mitigating invasive species, and 638 implementation/expansion. Recognizing that DOI leadership is coming into place, Chair Kissee proposed tabling discussion on BIA activity until their leadership is fully in place.

Committee Member Barquin questioned whether USDA could share additional information about the departmental manual. Acting Director Rakola responded that OTR will discuss internally how to seek TAC feedback on the draft manual before the next subcommittee meeting. Committee Member Barquin proposed that forest partnerships and 638 programming should remain a priority, with 638 program authorities being addressed by each subcommittee separately. Additionally, he reflected on previous deliberation for federal match and protecting sensitivities of nation-to-nation conversation under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

Committee Member Teves reiterated that the TAC should continue focusing on previously submitted recommendations. Chair Kissee acknowledged belief that USDA was developing a 'recommendation tracker.' Vice Chair Baldy suggested that while some recommendations originated in one subcommittee, they may have broader implication that should be clarified across multiple USDA agencies. Discussion proposed framing recommendations more deliberately in future reports.

ADJOURN

Upon motion duly made and seconded, the TAC adjourned at 4:43 P.M. Eastern Time.

I hereby certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the foregoing minutes are accurate and complete.

Trenton Kissee
Chair, Tribal Advisory Committee