

USDA TRIBAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

September 18, 2025

The Tribal Advisory Committee (the Committee) was convened for its meeting at approximately 12:00 A.M. Eastern Time on September 18, 2025, virtually on Zoom webinar.

In accordance with the provisions of Public Law 92-463, the meeting was open to the public from approximately 9:00 A.M. Eastern Standard Time to approximately 4:48 P.M. on September 18, 2025.

Council Members Present:

Trenton Kisse, Committee Chair
Meagen Baldy, Committee Vice Chair
William Barquin
Ben Jacobs
Karen Linnell
Council Member David Pourier, Oglala Sioux Tribe
Whitney Sawney
Kelsey Scott
Glenn Teves

Council Members Absent:

President Whitney Gravelle, Bay Mills Indian Community

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

Trevor Benson, Policy Advisor
Josiah Griffin, Designated Federal Officer (DFO)
Jeffrey Harris, Program Analyst
Elena Krajeski, Administrative Officer
Kayla Roche, Special Assistant
Taylor Schad, Program Analyst
Lawrence Shorty, Director, Tribe Colleges/Universities Program
Lisa Yellow Luger, Program Analyst

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

Bryan Mercier, Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)
Trina Locke, Director of Environmental and Natural Resources, Office of Trust Services,
BIA

ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

Committee members considered and approved the agenda without amendment.

ADOPTION OF THE FEBRUARY 2025 MEETING MINUTES

Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee unanimously adopted meeting minutes of the September 2025 TAC meeting.

SUBCOMMITTEE UPDATES

References to Committee members in this section acknowledge whether the member also chairs a corresponding Tribal Advisory Committee subcommittee.

Committee Administration Subcommittee. Chair Kisse expressed an interest in further reviewing Committee recommendations during the December meeting, recognizing that many USDA officials are still acclimating to their roles. He furthered that, while the Committee has taken action to clarify previous recommendations, these steps must continue over the Committee's life.

Economic Development Subcommittee. Committee Chair Scott reflected that the subcommittee's discussions focused on credit access and engagement levels with USDA offices through the Deferred Resignation Program, leading into a potential reorganization. Where USDA has taken a stance that certain obligations no longer reflect administration priorities, she expressed a desire to identify resources that may fill perceived gaps in food system investment.

Education and Research Subcommittee. Committee Chair Sawney summarized previous subcommittee meetings as prioritizing capacity and resource availability of Tribal Colleges/Universities (TCUs). Subcommittee members also acknowledged the need for additional infrastructure investment across TCUs for maintenance and workforce development. As Indian Country continues to promote food sovereignty interests, Committee Chair Sawney expressed a desire for additional greenhouse access and food safety and inspection curriculum.

Similarly, Committee Chair Teves stated his excitement on the administration's interest in transferring funds to Historically Black Colleges and Universities and TCUs. He also encouraged Ranking Member Craig, House Committee on Agriculture, and Agriculture Secretary Rollins to prioritize appointing a Committee member with TCU expertise.

Ranching, Farm Production, and Conservation Subcommittee. Committee Chair Scott reflected that previous subcommittee meetings explored the implications of the Partnership for Climate Smart Production program transition to the Advancing Markets for Producers program. She also expressed an interest by the subcommittee in addressing how USDA's disaster assistance resources can better include livestock and

ranching practices. Based on the 2022 Census of Agriculture findings, she affirmed that most of the Tribal agriculture production is from livestock, poultry and related products.

Food, Food Safety, and Trade Subcommittee. Committee Chair Baldy summarized previous subcommittee discussions to include the impact of Local Food Purchase Assistance program funding and availability of food inspection on Tribal lands. She also acknowledged subcommittee member interest that federal programming should consider the gamut of traditional foods important to Tribal communities, even where those foods may otherwise be considered exotic. Caviar and crab, for example, remain integral foods to many Tribal diets due to their local availability and nutritional benefit. Committee Member Teves commented on separate discussions with Senator Murkowski exploring more expansive protein access under the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program, which could include these commercially available traditional foods and other livestock products. Lastly, Committee Chair Baldy reflected on subcommittee members' desire to ensure the USDA Food and Nutrition Service remains at USDA and is not transferred to another federal department.

Chair Kisse acknowledged several public comments expressing the uniqueness of Alaska and Hawai'i food systems. He commented that minor disruptions in supply chains for the continental U.S. may carry greater impacts for those more remote states and that the TAC may benefit from deliberating on these issues. Coordination with Committee Members Linnell and Teves is necessary to effectively manage these conversations.

Forest and Public Lands Management Subcommittee. Committee Chair Barquin summarized previous subcommittee discussion on wildfire risk mitigation and agency staff changes. To effectively accomplish the administration's priorities, subcommittee members suggested that either new staff must be in place or new partnerships will be necessary for activities like timber production and wildfire mitigation. Committee Member Barquin identified the need to explore new recommendations on the Tribal Forest Protection Act. Chair Kisse further reflected on previous public comment regarding the "Roadless Rule" rescission.

DOI UPDATE

Staffing Updates. Director Mercier opened by commenting that DOI and BIA are fortunate in only being impacted by two rounds of the Deferred Resignation Program or "Fork in the Road." Following this program, 400 employees eligible to retire volunteered to participate, including leadership from the agriculture and natural resource program. With an ongoing hiring freeze and these positions still on payroll, Director Mercier identified that DOI cannot backfill these vacancies.

Recognizing robust support from Secretary Burgum and the Acting Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs (AS-IA), Director Mercier felt confident that BIA staffing levels would otherwise hold. Director Mercier shared with the Committee the appointment of Janel

Broderick to Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs who, at the time of this meeting, exercised the delegated authority as AS-IA.

DOI/USDA Memorandum of Understanding. Director Locke shared a commitment to continuing and expanding the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with USDA Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service beyond those agencies. The partnering Departments may need to host a Tribal listening session or consultation to hear from Tribes which elements should be included. Based, in part, on Committee feedback, DOI and USDA are exploring a plan for geospatial data sharing and exploring opportunities for removing redundancy and red tape in agriculture and National Environmental Policy Act regulations. Through these processes, Director Locke commented that DOI will continue to coordinate with USDA and other partners on training needs for federal partners, Tribes, producers, and other lessees.

Agriculture/Leasing Policies. Director Locke shared that DOI is partnering with USDA and the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative to explore changes for agriculture regulations and provide additional support for producers. She expected to share these updates at the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) conference as a resource for Tribes. Additionally, DOI is building an artificial intelligence tool to aid Tribes in developing these plans.

DOI continues to move forward on draft updates to agriculture leasing regulations. These updates seek to provide greater consistency across all subparts of the leasing regulations and other authorizing statutes, e.g., American Indian Agricultural Resource Management Act. Director Locke also identified working toward updates in grazing permit policy that, among other potential changes, address trespass issues. DOI plans to seek tribal feedback through consultation on these updates. The DOI Branch of Agriculture and Rangeland Development published updated handbooks and manuals with a 'rangeland management' handbook under review.

Committee Discussion. Chair Kisse shared his appreciation since many of these changes are consistent with Committee input. He encouraged DOI to continue leveraging IAC as a venue for these discussions. Chair Kisse also requested further discussion on how Executive Order 14308 *Empowering Commonsense Wildfire Prevention and Response* can help address wildfires impacting Tribal lands. He offered a more expansive MOU with USDA can support greater coordination. Director Mercier shared that DOI may have updates by the next Committee meeting.

Committee Member Barquin shared that he looks forward to consultation with BIA before these decisions are made. He also requested clarification on whether BIA is continuing work on streamlining the fee to trust land transition process and allotment consultation. Director Mercier responded by noting BIA is still processing fee to trust applications; however, the processing rate has been impacted by capacity issues.

Committee Member Barquin also identified issues faced by the Kootenai Tribe in probate and title insurance where neither the U.S. nor the Tribe can attest who 'owns' a

land parcel. Director Mercier shared that probate is a top priority of Interior Secretary Burgum. DOI, he noted, faces a backlog of over 50 thousand cases and is surging resources, funding and people, to address these applications. Director Mercier acknowledged that it is not fair people have waited so long and that DOI is testing new tools for streamlining this process.

Council Member Pourier identified that some individuals may still be receiving lease checks on land sold on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Director Mercier requested clarification on where these issues arise.

OTR UPDATE

Staffing Updates. DFO Griffin introduced Trevor Benson as a policy advisor for the Office of Tribal Relations, a change from his previous role as special assistant. Mr. Benson shared that John Walk now serves as Acting Director of Tribal Relations.

USDA-American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) Leadership Group. Director Shorty indicated that Agriculture Deputy Secretary Vaden met with the USDA-AIHEC Leadership Group to hear from TCUs as 1994 land-grant institutions. USDA convened this leadership group to inform implementation of a memorandum of agreement with TCUs required by Section 882 of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-127).

Committee Updates. DFO Griffin updated Committee members on steps taken to fill current and future vacancies on the Committee. On August 8, USDA published a solicitation for nominations to fill four vacancies. These vacancies include one current vacancy to be appointed by the Ranking Member, House Committee on Agriculture, and three appointments to be made by Agriculture Secretary Rollins for member terms lapsing December 2025.

Reorganization Consultations. On July 24, 2025, Agriculture Secretary Rollins issued Secretarial Memorandum 1078-015 on the *Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan*. This plan designates Deputy Secretary Vaden as lead for implementing or adjusting the plan as needed. On September 12, Deputy Secretary Vaden formally invited Tribal leaders and Alaska Native Corporations to consult on this plan. These consultations were scheduled for October 14th in Washington, D.C., and October 16th in Denver, Colorado. Both consultations included the opportunity for virtual participation.

COMMITTEE DELIBERATION

Recommendation Status. Committee Member Barquin requested an overview of any recommendation updates to date. DFO Griffin identified Committee recommendations submitted by the Committee are available on the Committee website. OTR provided the Committee with an initial reference of recommendation status as of September 17, 2025, noting elements or findings provided may change based on updates to applicable laws, policies, and agency programming. In this tracker, DFO Griffin mentioned the

status “not discretionary” may mean the recommendation requires a change to statute or is a matter primarily delegated to another federal department for oversight.

Chair Kissee requested further discussion to better understand this delineation. Committee Member Barquin encouraged USDA utilize all discretionary authority in implementing meaningful changes for Indian Country, including on reprogramming ‘saved funding’ for Tribal interests.

Committee Member Scott requested clarification on whether the status of recommendations may change. DFO Griffin confirmed that recommendation types may shift from “nondiscretionary” to “discretionary” or “complete” to “not complete” based on changes to applicable laws and policies.

Farm to School Program. Committee Member Teves expressed excitement for the consolidated release of Farm to School program funding. He indicated interest in future subcommittee discussion on whether a program targeting Tribal foods, including teaching elementary school students how to farm, may be feasible.

Biomass/Timber Programming. Committee Member Barquin requested information on any USDA programs supporting biomass/biochar programming or programs to support cross laminated timber. He also requested the U.S. Forest Service conduct technical assistance for Tribes that do not have the internal capacity on forest management.

Executive Orders/Secretarial Memorandum. Committee Member Barquin requested clarification on any distinction between secretarial orders, secretarial memorandum, guidance, and policy. He also requested clarification on whether Executive Order 14291 on *Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission* supports the practice of tribal cultures and religion on U.S. Forest Service lands.

Alaska Native/Hawaiian Issues. Committee Member Jacobs and Chair Kissee requested to hear from Committee Members Linnell and Teves regarding the unique challenges Alaska Natives and Hawaiians face.

Committee Member Linnell identified the need for unique pay schedules to Alaska and Hawai'i through USDA conservation programs. She also reflected that subsistence should be recognized as eligible for funding, including in the Farm to School program.

Committee Member Teves shared issues in accessing USDA programs. To qualify for the USDA Water and Environmental Programs (WEP), for example, the average household income must be below \$78.5 thousand; however, the average household earns \$102 thousand on O'ahu homestead communities because multiple generations reside under the same roof. He indicated families may also “adopt” other families or Hawaiians to stay with them. While WEP also offers loans, homestead communities cannot afford them based on the allowable rates.

Committee Member Teves identified the cost of living in Hawai'i is 85 percent over the national average, with average home costs over \$1 million. Due to the cost of living, he reflected many Hawaiians cannot live in Hawai'i. He recommended to increase family home income qualifications on Native lands or that USDA adopt a more holistic approach to eligibility accounting for cost of living, the number of families in one home, and availability of housing.

Committee Member Teves referenced that at any given time, the state only carries enough food to last seven days. With eight islands, he finds travel and managing robust, local food systems more challenging. He requested additional resources to address invasive species, including in collaboration with the U.S. military whose planes may be vectors for bringing plant pests to the Islands. Despite these challenges, he noted success of programs like the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program (GusNIP) and the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA) in strengthening local food economies and addressing hunger. LFPA, for example, received a seven to one match locally.

Lastly, Committee Member Linnell encouraged recognition of Tribal food inspectors and food codes to help fill gaps in Tribal food systems. Committee Member Jacobs agreed. Chair Kissee raised the opportunity for Tribes to clarify food preservation research and Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures for plant management. Committee Member Linnell responded by citing only two USDA inspectors for all Alaska. She noted the State is working to establish a Department of Agriculture and that research is ongoing.

When asked where Hawaiians process meat product, Committee Member Teves indicated Hawaiians ship animals to Oregon and Washington which then return finished product to the Islands. While some are working toward grass raised pork, he said only few are successful.

Chair Kissee questioned whether any kind of fencing addresses deer, an issue previously raised by Committee Member Teves. Committee Member Teves responded the fence must be at least eight feet; however, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) does not allow perimeter fencing or fencing as a practice to keep animals out of a property. Chair Kissee suggested additional discussion may be necessary with NRCS, BIA, and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

Committee Member Barquin questioned whether Hawaiian Homestead was eligible under the Substantially Underserved Trust Area (SUTA) designation and encouraged an amendment to SUTA including Tribal fee land as eligible. He questioned what additional recommendations the Committee should make to advance Alaska Native and Hawaiian interests.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

DFO Griffin opened the public comment period at 3:00 P.M. Pacific 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.

Meghan Bishop, Director of Policy, National Congress of American Indians commented that the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) is one of the oldest and largest representative bodies on Tribal interests. She thanked the Tribal Advisory Committee for submitting many recommendations to Congress. She also thanked OTR for meeting with NCAI earlier that week. She recognized that NCAI is a confounder of the Native Farm Bill Coalition (NFBC) and that many Committee recommendations align with NFBC priorities. She asked the TAC to reaffirm the 78 recommendations submitted and requested the Committee refrain from using the word “indigenous,” which she worried may confuse USDA.

Ms. Bishop encouraged USDA to contract with Tribal organizations holding expertise on Indian Self-Determination Education and Assistance Act implementation for technical assistance on negotiating Tribal contracts/compacts. She also encouraged USDA to adopt additional flexibilities under the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and other feeding programs.

She recommended USDA designate the director of tribal relations as a political appointment and encouraged USDA to meet more regularly with the Tribal Advisory Committee. Through her comments, Ms. Bishop requested more credit training and for USDA to waive the need for title or title insurance to resolve probate delays. She also requested USDA establish a Community Development Financial Institute relending program across USDA's Rural Development and Farm Service Agency. She encouraged stronger investments in tribal broadband projects and several changes to the Tribal Forest Protection Act, such as removing the border limitation and expanding prescribed burning.

Brad Hall, President of Blackfeet Community College, commented on an awareness of the many steps USDA has taken to support TCUs and co-chairs USDA's Tribal College advisory committee. He remarked that AIHEC will submit his nomination to serve on the Committee. He shared a belief the last USDA-AIHEC Leadership Working Group meeting was grounded in mutual respect and space for USDA to effectively recognize TCUs as land-grant institutions which have invested in research and their communities. He encouraged Congress and USDA set-aside additional funding for research projects and food sovereignty venture, including through targeted set-asides in NIFA programs excluding the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program.

Justine Kougl, Owner/Operator of Beef Cattle Operation, expressed concern on the termination of the National Intertribal Food Business Center award. She shared her operation applied for a business builder subaward and completed the necessary process, but she now faces uncertainty in whether this funding will move forward. She expressed facing challenges in bringing food to markets for Tribal communities and encouraged recognition of how the National Intertribal Food Business Center award supported self-sufficiency and national food security.

Joe van Alstine, President of Midwest Region of National Association of Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (NAFDPIR) and appointee to the Michigan FSA State Committee, expressed opposition to the Committee recommendation requesting Congress remove the statutory prohibition for joint enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Instead, he requested USDA take steps to streamline this transition process. He also shared opposition to the Committee recommendation extending P.L. 93-638 (638) authority to FDPIR, believing that taking steps too quickly could be detrimental to participating Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs).

Committee Member Barquin requested clarification on whether Mr. van Alstine's comments represent the NAFDPIR organization or a specific region. Mr. van Alstine responded that ITOs support the demonstration projects but do not support applying 638-authority to the full program. Mr. van Alstine encouraged additional fact-finding on the successes and challenges of these demonstration projects before taking broader steps. He also noted that not all Tribes would desire to procure all foods necessary for a complete FDPIR food package.

Committee Member Jacobs requested clarification on if Mr. van Alstine supported expansion of the ongoing demonstration project. Mr. van Alstine encouraged the authorities to remain as is where Tribes may apply to purchase identified food items locally.

Leonardo Wassillie, Nenana Native Association member, commented the Association has an active broadband project. His community recently faced wildfire, and he commented on the importance of broadband access during a disaster. With many community members only accessing water from a spicket off the Tribal administration building, he recognized the need for additional infrastructure investment.

Mr. Wassillie expressed appreciation for Health and Human Services Secretary Kennedy visiting his communities and considering the significance of indigenous, healthy foods under Make America Healthy Again initiatives. He cited upwards of three-month wait times for SNAP application. Mr. Wassillie commented that USDA should take steps to keep vendors SNAP certified because when rural community stores can no longer accept SNAP, they may not be able to keep food on shelves. He also shared gratitude for the experience Bryan Mercier brings to BIA. He encouraged additional, more flexible programs being made available that focus on offering funding or loan

guarantees based at each milestone or that support meat processing and cold storage for culturally significant events.

Jayme Murray, CEO of Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Authority, echoed Ms. Kougler's comments. He mentioned that the Cheyenne River Sioux project would feed some of the poorest people in the world and that the National Intertribal Food Business Center supports businesses and strengthens food systems in a way that keeps these operations economically viable.

Everette Anderson, Tribal Member of Bristol Bay, commented on the need for additional cold storage infrastructure for fisheries. The Bristol Bay Region services 31 villages relying on fisheries for both subsistence and economic investments. For commercial fisheries, he reflected on gaps in the cold chain between harvest, processing, and shipment. Part of this issue, he felt, rests on high energy costs. As USDA continues to procure seafood products, he encouraged additional investment for greater Tribal alignment. He commented that while Executive Order 14276 on *Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness* may be aggressive, many communities carry an abundance of resource not entering market. Mr. Anderson suggested additional workforce training may support these efforts. Lastly, he commented that communities have faced a funding freeze for administering school lunch.

Donita Fischer, Food Store Owner/Operator, requested USDA reopen the Regional Food Business Center funding. She indicated these funds support food sovereignty.

TAC DELIBERATIONS ON PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chair Kisse expressed gratitude to public commenters for their robust input with the Committee.

Committee Member Barquin commented that making a 638-authority statutory does not make the program mandatory. Chair Kisse echoed that self-governance is the most effective tool. Committee Member Barquin expressed that further conversation with NAFDPIR may be necessary to understand their position.

Committee Member Barquin suggested the Committee consider a recommendation that two reorganization consultations are not sufficient. Council Member Pourier suggested the Bureau of Indian Affairs conduct another session on 155 leasing. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- The Committee recommends the Secretary extend government-to-government consultation until December 12th and to schedule additional government-to-government consultations including at the National Congress of American Indians conference.

Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- The Chair should write a letter to the Secretary with this recommendation.

Committee Member Scott reflected on comments from the National Congress of American Indians and others on the need for capital and credit. She encouraged Committee subcommittees to call out or redefine recommendations on this topic, including consolidating recommendations as appropriate. Committee Barquin requested additional reviews on recommendation progress.

ADJOURN

Upon motion duly made and carried, without objection, the meeting adjourned at approximately 4:48 P.M. Pacific Standard Time.

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

Trenton Kissee
Chair, Tribal Advisory Committee