USDA TRIBAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
May 7-8, 2025

The Tribal Advisory Committee (the Committee) was convened for its meeting at approximately 9:00 A.M. Eastern Time on May 7, 2025, at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Jaime L. Whitten Building in Washington, D.C., and via 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 4:40 P.M. on May 7, 2025. The meeting was open to the public from approximately 9:00 A.M. Eastern Standard Time to approximately 12:00 PM Eastern Standard Time on May 8, 2025.

Council Members Present:

Trenton Kissee, Committee Chair
Meagen Baldy, Committee Vice Chair
William Barquin
President Whitney Gravelle, Bay Mils Indian Community
Ben Jacobs
Karen Linnell
Council Member David Pourier, Oglala Sioux Tribe
Whitney Sawney
Kelsey Scott
Glenn Teves

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)
Jeffrey Harris, Program Analyst
Taylor Schad, Program Analyst
Elena Krajeski, Administrative Officer
Trevor Benson, Special Assistant

Other staff of USDA attending were:

Ricki Schroeder, Chief of Staff, Research, Education, and Economics (REE)
Kristin Sleeper, Deputy Under Secretary (DUS), Natural Resources and Environment (NRE)
Dr. Spiro Stefanou, Acting DUS, REE
David Matthews, Director of State Operations, Rural Development (RD)
Bill Beam, Administrator, Farm Service Agency (FSA)
Aubrey Bettencourt, Chief, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

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

Scott Davis, Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior, exercising the delegated authority of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs (ASIA)
Johnna Blackhair, Deputy Bureau Director, Office of Trust Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs (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 February 2025 TAC meeting.

USDA 2025 PRIORITIES

Ricki Schroeder, Chief of Staff, REE. Mr. Schroeder welcomed members of the Tribal Advisory Committee to Washington, D.C., for this first in-person meeting with the new administration. He shared that Secretary Rollins is moving forward with this administration's priorities, putting farmers first and unleashing rural prosperity in communities across the country.

As other Departments have stated, this administration intends to uphold and honor the nation-to-nation relationship with Tribes. USDA has formalized that commitment through the issuance of a Secretarial Memo which clarifies and reinforces the trust responsibilities of the United States toward Tribal nations, while recognizing the unique legal relationship with the Native Hawaiian Community. He also shared that the Department held its first Tribal consultation under this administration last month in Arizona, where Acting Deputy Under Secretary John Walk met with the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations Tribal Leaders Working Group. Finally, he noted that USDA had participated in the Department of the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee on May 6, 2025.

Committee Member Barquin asked about how coordination between USDA and DOI could be strengthened in service of Indian Country. Chair Kissee commented that the Committee expected to issue recommendations for stronger coordination between the two Departments, leaning on USDA heavily to voice the importance of on-the-ground agriculture needs as subject matter experts and to advocate as such with Interior. For example, utilizing Agricultural Resource Management Plans (ARMPs) to better serve Tribal producers in planning and conservation, reducing duplicative paperwork for ARMPs at DOI and then conservation plans submitted separately to USDA NRCS. The Committee expects to clarify those recommendations and put them forth again during this meeting.

Deputy Bureau Director Blackhair shared that the two Departments share goals of communication, collaboration and consultation with Tribal nations.

Kristin Sleeper, DUS Natural Resources and Environment. DUS Sleeper stated that the Secretary is committed to nation-to-nation trust and treaty obligations. She noted she worked in Montana for years. She understands what tribal core values are and deeply cares about the land. She understands that Tribes are the original keeps of the land since time immemorial. She expressed that USDA should generally do a better job, e.g., identify workforce opportunities and capacities. There are opportunities for increased energy production, for cutting red tape, and innovated ideas on workforce opportunities. Chair Kissee expressed interest in opportunities for streamlining cultural burn permitting at the federal or regional level.

Dr. Spiro Stefanou, Acting DUS, REE. Acting DUS Stefanou introduced himself by sharing his permanent role as Administrator for USDA's Economic Research Service while the DUS nominee awaits Senate confirmation. He shared that he values relationships with Tribes and Tribal Colleges and Universities. Through discussion, Acting DUS Stefanou provided an overview of the five agencies under REE, citing that for every U.S. dollar the federal government spends on agriculture, the public sees a benefit of 20 U.S. dollars.

Chair Kissee affirmed his interest in data. Reflecting on the loss of Committee Member Roessel, Chair Kissee raised that Tribal Colleges/Universities play an integral role in workforce development and that the federal return on investment to these institutions is significant. Committee Member Sawney supported these statements, acknowledging Tribal Colleges/Universities as hubs for research and economic development nationwide. Committee Member Linnell noted that Alaska Pacific University is seeking recognition as a 1994 Tribal land-grant institution. Acting DUS Stefanou agreed that these and other institutions are important partners for educating youth and giving them tools to support their communities.

David Matthews, Director of State Operations, RD. Mr. Matthews expressed his enjoyment in working with Tribal nations during the first Trump administration through his positions with the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). In discussing the 88 RD programs, he furthered that the vast majority maintain tribal eligibility and that he shares interest in a more efficient process for applicants. While considering appointments for RD state directors, he acknowledged that the administration has turned down candidates lacking relationship with Tribes in those states with significant Tribal presence.

Chair Kissee suggested that Tribes with Agricultural Resource Management Plans should be considered eligible for the Value Added Producer Grant. Committee Member Teves also noted that the *President's FY2026 Discretionary Budget Request* includes a $20 million reduction for the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, expressing hope that additional partnerships with the USDA Rural Housing Service be made available.

Bill Beam, Administrator, FSA. Administrator Beam shared that he was able to visit Indian Country during prior Trump-Pence administration and saw firsthand how red tape between the Interior and USDA placed bureaucracy between the producers and their services. That means getting the federal government out of the way for your producers and Tribes to enroll in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which puts land unsuitable for production into conservation to protect air, water, soil, and wildlife. The Administrator highlighted the unique challenges of CRP regarding fractionated land ownership and enrollment challenges. Through partnerships with the BIA, USDA expects to be able to take some of those roadblocks away. USDA expects to open sign-ups for CRP again soon.

Committee Member Scott asked about limits in CRP regarding the acreage cap, raising that Tribal acres historically could not access this program. She asked USDA to address this barrier by prioritizing Tribal acres. Member Scott also expressed the importance of rural service centers, particularly in providing access to credit in what is a "credit desert" for rural Tribal producers. Administrator Beam replied that the Secretary testified before Congress on May 6th that an FSA county office cannot be closed unless Congress approves it, and USDA intends to keep those offices open. The Administrator acknowledged the challenges of staffing issues, which go back years, but commented that USDA is doing its best to move staff around and prioritize customer service.

Aubrey Bettencourt, Chief, NRCS. Chief Bettencourt shared her background in farming, as well as her prior service at both USDA and DOI. Her previous work focused on resource management and water, from on the ground infrastructure to regulatory policy.

NRCS just celebrated its 90th year, reflecting a significant commitment to care for the farmers and the resources that care for the United States. Incorporating those core principles around science-based and locally led conservation, NRCS provides technical assistance to keep farmers farming and foresters foresting. Chief Bettencourt expressed a desire to keep that promise alive for the next 90 years through supporting field staff providing top-tier customer service. This goal includes assessing opportunities for interagency partnerships and providing staff with the resources necessary to engage farmers, including Tribal nations, in the field.

Committee Member Teves raised concerns around high turnover rates among soil conservationists, noting that it takes a long time to get to know farmers. He also noted experience that deer fences are not a recognized conservation practice in Hawai‘i, creating challenges for farmers who must address significant deer populations. He also commented on the Hawaiian Islands' unique challenges with the increasing presence of invasive species. Chief Bettencourt acknowledged the challenges of recruiting and retaining good staff, particularly in the field, committing to examining the root cause of the issue as USDA right-sizes its workforce.

Committee Member Linnell commented that the Regional Tribal Technical Advisory Committee was able to meet last year in a remote location. She expressed the need for

timely payments for lengthy supply chains, where trade could be halted for critical inputs which Alaskans must transport through Canada. Chief Bettencourt expressed her enthusiasm for those future committee meetings, including visiting Alaska.

Committee Member Scott voiced support for the Chief's priorities of enhancing service providers, data sharing, and benchmarking new ways of interpreting rankings. In South Dakota, she acknowledged only knowing of two qualified service providers for conservation planning, expressing concern that these entities effectively manage a duopoly. Committee Member Scott proposed that additional workforce training could address this issue. In the delivery of farm disaster assistance program, she encouraged the Department not inadvertently exclude livestock producers or ranchers that are a predominant share of Native agriculture due to inarable farmland. In the assistance for tariff impacts, she noted no livestock inclusion existed.

OTR UPDATE

Acting Director Rakola thanked President Gravelle for the invitation to participate in the STAC and announced that she is leaving USDA. Mr. Benson introduced himself and briefly shared his background in nonprofits supporting intergovernmental issues and Native language translation. He expressed a desire to ensure Tribal nations receive the same respect as international dignitaries.

Acting Director Rakola provided an overview of ongoing Office of Tribal Relations activities. OTR will welcome four interns for a 10-week summer term beginning in June through collaboration with the Partnership for Public Service. OTR is continuing support for the Intertribal Technical Assistance Network, which remains a critical partner since 2011. As of this meeting, no cooperative agreement managed by the Office of Tribal Relations was frozen or impacted by a funding freeze. Other ongoing cooperative agreement partnerships include the Tribal Public Health Center at North Dakota State University, the Tribal Bison Voluntary Inspection Fee Coverage Program, and an agreement to replenish Native seeds.

Chair Kissee questioned whether OTR was aware whether the administration would preserve OTR's reporting structure. Acting Director Rakola acknowledged that she has shared this recommendation with the administration but that USDA may not have answers as the Department considers workforce efficiencies. Committee Member Linnell expressed concern on the Department's capacity to fill new vacancies, e.g., three vacancies from employees accepting deferred resignation after USDA taking years to fill these roles with qualified candidates. Among these roles, Chair Kissee noted a priority to appoint a director of Tribal Relations.

TAC DISCUSSION AND COMMENT ON USDA OPENING REMARKS

Chair Kissee noted that there are many opportunities for collaboration in the new administration, particularly for self-governance Tribes participating in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services programs. The Make American Healthy Again agenda

seems to indicate an opportunity to fold agricultural activities into self-governance health programs, and the Chair requested that Secretary Rollins act as the voice of agriculture within those opportunities. With many new leaders arriving at USDA, the Committee intends to offer new recommendations raising Indian Country's voice in USDA's identified priorities.

Committee Member Teves commented on the importance of the Gus Schumacher program as a vital part of access to healthy foods, which cuts the price in half of Native-grown and locally grown healthy foods.

Committee Member Barquin commented on the difficulty of determining which programs are still ongoing, which are funded, which are canceled, and which are paused. For the Committee's recommendations to be relevant, the Committee needs an updated and accurate understanding of where USDA programs stand. The reduction in workforce continues to be a concern. While stakeholders certainly admit that there could be more efficiencies, they are seeing their liaisons leaving federal service and need to understand how the reorganization will impact Indian Country. The reduction creates more opportunities for Tribal partnerships in some areas; noting in others, Tribes rely on federal staff to carry out their duties so that they can play their parts. Committee Member Barquin also expressed concern around the impending expiration of the Tribal Advisory Committee's charter and asked for a more efficient process.

Chair Kissee asked for updates on cuts to funding, as well as an explanation of whether such funding would be repurposed. The opportunity for contracting and compacting with Tribal nations is ripe for a Tribal consultation. The Committee understands the need for taxpayer savings, reducing redundancies, and streamlining services, but would hate to see the funds intended for use in agriculture and natural resources be repurposed elsewhere. Uncertainty is always the name of the game in agriculture in terms of weather and markets, but producers could benefit from less uncertainty from the federal government. The Committee notes that putting farmers first requires the Secretary to communicate to the administration how important that certainty is to support producers of food, fiber, and fuel.

Committee Member Linnell commented that program funding could be 638 contracted, where funding to Tribes is then excluded from Federal matching fund requirements and allows Tribes to leverage such funding to access other opportunities. Those authorities provide an opportunity to do more with less. Member Linnell also reiterated the concern over the expiration of charters and memoranda of understanding, commenting that the requirement to review and refresh those documents routinely is not efficient. Committee Member Linnell also recommended making Tribal consultations as inclusive as possible, particularly to include producers in Alaska and Hawai‘i.

Committee Member Scott amplified the importance of ongoing engagement between USDA and Indian Country. The Office of Tribal Relations has been instrumental in helping this Committee to understand the TAC's role, how it aligns with other USDA advisory committees, and how to engage with the new administration amidst turnover of

personnel. The Committee is here to provide support and guidance to the USDA, and members are excited to engage in opportunities in addition to the quarterly meetings.

President Gravelle raised an issue identified to the Department of the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee (STAC) regarding a "hold harmless" provision, which is a trust responsibility to Tribal nations across the United States. This provision would ensure that Tribal consultations are upheld, which is not just a conversation but a true consideration of the impacts of these programs on Tribal nations regarding health, food, and education. Tribes are on the ground and have the best perspective on what's happening. She expressed that examining the impacts of these changes on Tribes is part of the sacred trust and treaty responsibilities.

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 Kissee Subcommittee hopes to put forward recommendations to the Secretary and to the relevant committees of Congress in a mid-year report.

Economic Development Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Scott expressed gratitude for Administrator Beam recognizing the importance of county offices, where access is critical to supporting Tribal agriculture and propelling forward economic development efforts within their communities. The Subcommittee Chair will share potential recommendations around maintaining staffing levels and services, refraining from closure and consolidation of offices in Tribal communities. Ongoing conversations within the subcommittees around the impact of tariffs on producers, as well as disaster response, have centered on disparate prioritization of row crops over livestock producers.

The subcommittees have also discussed the termination or pause of federal financial assistance raised questions about recommendations made by the Committee in its prior report, where economic, market access, and technical assistance projects remain paused and are not reimbursing award recipients. This uncertainty limits organizations' abilities to provide services, engage producers, and carry out their work. With production expanding comes demand for additional access to the marketplace, pointing to new needs to reach new and beginning producers to create that access and drive economic development across rural America.

Committee Member Teves concurred that the pause in funding has created stress and uncertainty in agricultural communities, and that more information is needed. The importance of extending extension services in Tribal communities is critical

Vice Chair Baldy raised that the Local Food Purchase Agreement program sunsetting is putting a strain on Tribal communities. That decision has reduced the funding available to producers. Getting local foods into schools and stores has been a challenge, and she

hopes that finding new solutions for producers will be critical to prevent them from reducing production.

Education and Research Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Sawney expressed the importance of expanding FRTEP and looking at a form to permanently fund the program's work through formulas related to service populations to Tribal land bases, with the background of historic under-investment in Indian Country. The subcommittee also discussed parity in funding to Tribal colleges and universities, where continuity in funding is critical to those institutions and their partners to ensure that they have the resources to tailor services to Indian country. The subcommittee has raised the importance of sufficient agricultural educators to provide culturally relevant materials.

Subcommittee Co-Chair Teves commented on the importance of curriculum development around indigenous foods, particularly at the K-12 level. He noted the challenge of teachers taking on additional responsibilities and highlighted the opportunity to align these materials within STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) curriculum and meeting teachers where they're at. Member Teves commented on the farm to school program jointly funded by SNAP-Ed and the State of Hawai'i have created opportunities to get native foods into schools.

Ranching, Farm Production, and Conservation Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Scott reiterated the importance of ongoing access to well-staffed, resourced USDA offices is critical to economic growth and bringing meat to market. The need for infrastructure development brings commodity food sources and enhances USDA investments in those spaces through technical assistance and/or Rural Development funding for infrastructure. The agreements specific to processing indigenous meats were critical to supporting food security, where the infrastructure is simply lacking in rural areas where livestock and wild animal production takes place. Conversations have centered around conservation, where understanding staffing plans for NRCS will be critical to upholding commitments to trust lands. Recommendations may be updates to the preliminary report in 2024, as well as new recommendations focused on reducing barriers to entry in NRCS cost share programs.

Committee Member Linell commented that cost displacement is a challenge in Alaska due to the cost of shipping. By the time produce arrives, it is often rotten and unsaleable. Being able to do cost displacement or having production in rural communities is vital. Reducing the cost of getting healthy foods into schools is also critical.

Food, Food Safety, and Trade Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Baldy emphasized the desire to prioritize previous recommendations for Tribes to administer food safety oversight and inspections. The Subcommittee Chair also noted that the prior report neglected to include a recommendation on including American Indian, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian food in market access programs. The Pacific Northwest must be included in food and nutrition programs so that elders can consume native fish. The Subcommittee would like to see USDA break down barriers to becoming USDA

certified vendors, noting that authorities present challenges for meat, eggs, and more. The impact of tariffs on Tribal producers is yet unknown, but Tribes hope to open up nation-to-nation trade within Tribal communities, re-establishing trade routes and having access to the Foreign Agriculture Services funding will be critical.

Committee Member Linell commented on the importance of the authority for Tribes to process their traditional foods according to their historical and cultural practices, particularly in food safety authorities.

President Gravelle commented that it would be welcome for USDA to recommit to traditional, indigenous foods. There is often a cultural barrier, where foods are perceived as exotic or expensive. As an example, Alaska Natives often share crab or caviar with their elders. That is perceived as exotic by non-Tribal people because of its price in the lower 48 states; however, those products were traditional local foods shared with elders. President Gravelle asked USDA to recognize that those traditional foods are locally specific and not exotic, where they have been consumed for many years. This concern is also in SNAP where some states report distribution issues, such as the state of Tennessee reporting that the entire program website was unavailable, and Alaska citizens reporting that their electronic benefits cards were intermittently not working to provide benefits.

Forest and Public Lands Management Subcommittee. Subcommittee Chair Barquin reflected on the “Fix our Forests” hearing in Congress the prior day, where public members noted that the national forests and grasslands provide clean water, food, and vital benefits to the United States.

The Subcommittee has looked at partnerships, the respect of treaty rights to protect religious practices and sacred sites. The Subcommittee asked how national forests and grasslands will be properly managed with the Forest Service’s statements that they expect a 25% reduction in force, while the nation is also experiencing increased wildfire crises. Partnership opportunities offer a way for governments to carry out this work together with much fewer resources, recognizing not just this administration’s priorities in timber production, but also the importance of the benefits of national forests and grasslands. The Subcommittee expects to look at forest planning issues, recommending that the Forest Service restart its planning committees and Tribal committees.

President Gravelle commented that Executive and Secretarial Orders have signaled an intent to open up public lands for timber harvesting. Some Tribes oppose this move, where others support timber harvest as an economic opportunity. If public lands are opened, President Gravelle asked if those would be offered to Tribes first, whether Tribes would have the first opportunity to contract for activities – particularly those occurring on or near Tribal lands, and re-emphasizing the importance for Tribal nations, where each Tribe will be unique and will need a one-on-one consultation to acknowledge those who support timber activities versus those who do not. The Section 106 historic preservation requirements to protect historic and cultural resources will be critical by engaging in Tribal consultation. Those Tribes who wish to participate could

experience significant economic benefit. President Gravelle noted that much of the National Forest and National Parks system are adjacent to many Tribes' reservations, and that as part of the "land back" movement, any opportunity for the purchase of such lands should be offered to Tribes and not just states.

Chair Kissee noted that the recent interest in timber production includes a multi-use mandate for recreation, hunting and fishing for both traditional and non-traditional uses, conservation, and timber harvest. He cautioned the administration, asking whether harvesters are carrying out sustainable timber harvesting on public lands in the same way as they would on private lands. He noted that limited clear cutting can open opportunities for hunting and fishing, but wholesale clear cutting would not. Foraging activities are protected through treaty rights and are not supported through wholesale timber harvesting.

Committee Members Teves and Linell commented on the importance of incorporating indigenous knowledge into land management practices, offering the example of the Karuk practice of burning the underbrush to prevent large-scale forest fires. There cannot be a cookie cutter approach across the country, particularly when certain Tribes and villages are located in rainforests where fires do not occur.

Vice Chair Baldy asked USDA to look at basket material used 100 years ago and the material used today as a way to evaluate the impacts of land management, where such materials may no longer be available.

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS (BIA) DISCUSSION

Acting Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Davis outlined initial coordination between the Department of the Interior and USDA early in the administration, as well as his vision for creating user friendly services for Indian Country. He shared his background from North Dakota and his enthusiasm to know more staff in USDA and highlighted the importance of continued partnership on topics like data sharing and mapping of Tribal lands.

He acknowledged that offices must comply with applicable regulations and expressed a desire to identify wants to find ways to cut red tape and get to the shared goals together. He expressed gratitude to President Gravelle for her leadership of the Interior Secretary's Tribal Advisory Committee (STAC), where Tribal leaders discussed consolidating forums for Tribal consultation and input to streamline access to federal agencies for Tribes. The North Dakota Governor's office showed a model where all program agencies came together to provide information to Tribal leaders in a consolidated forum. To that end, the STAC invited numerous federal leaders from different departments to join their conversation.

President Gravelle shared the high points from the Interior's two-day STAC meeting and the importance of participation from USDA with the Interior, where many Tribal leaders were not aware that USDA had a Tribal Advisory Committee. Following USDA's

presentation, Tribes highlighted concerns around barriers to reclaiming ancestral lands. They noted that DOI oversees trust lands, whereas USDA manages farm programs, leaving Tribes uncertain of which agency to approach to allow better Tribal participation in farm, conservation, and agricultural leasing programs. Tribal leaders also asked for improved support for Tribal land acquisitions, highlighting the importance of giving Tribes the first opportunity to participate in land opportunities.

Another issue was raised in relation to food sovereignty and Tribal agriculture, where systems are often under-funded and yet over-regulated. The Interior's food sovereignty initiative called for support of seed saving, among other activities. A similar recommendation referenced land management for wildfire response systems, where Interior and Forest Service systems may operate separately despite their shared goals. Tribal leaders recommended the full implementation of the Tribal Forest Protection Act to allow contracting and compacting, increasing Tribal access to fire management funding and expanding the Good Neighbor Authority. President Gravelle noted that it was confounding that her nation's fire fighters were not allowed to service their own lands, while being able to service lands outside the reservation. Activities funded by disparate authorities complicate allocation of funds and creates a significant administrative burden, particularly when agencies have different reporting requirements for funding being used – even when that funding is used within one project which meets both agencies' needs.

President Gravelle expressed that there can be more coordination between Interior Secretary's Indian Water Rights Office and the USDA NRCS. Some of these efforts must go through Congress, but USDA has more significant funds to support water infrastructure and rebuilding. Aligning SIWRO with Rural Development wastewater disposal could allow prioritization for Tribes undergoing these water rights settlement issues. Dams and dam repairs are also a common issue. Opportunities could be as simple as providing information from USDA. Finally, Tribal leaders highlighted the importance of protecting cultural materials and sacred sites. The Interior is entrusted with Section 106 rights for cultural and historic preservation, but that process does not always take into consideration those lands managed by USDA. Seeking Tribal consultation across both agencies, particularly when timber activities are planned.

Committee Member Barquin raised concerns about allotment consolidation with a multitude of landowners, which prevents Tribal purchase of those lands for placement in trust and the return of such lands for agricultural production. Opportunities exist through USDA FSA programs supporting land purchase and consolidation, but limits exist from title insurance companies, where Tribes receive inconsistent decisions. Exploring technical assistance available to Tribal governments for better participation in Tribal Forest Protection Act and Good Neighbor Authorities is critical. Further, the law enforcement and investigations workforce within the Forest Service must be augmented by Tribal law enforcement, where some Tribal members do not feel safe to conduct foraging activities. Committee Member Barquin proposed further education of Forest Service law enforcement officers to understand the full scope of Tribal law enforcement authorities.

Acting Director Rakola commented that the existing Memorandum of Understanding between USDA and DOI related to farm production and conservation activities, but that it did not include the forestry and land management activities where the Committee members had highlighted additional needs for streamlining and coordination.

Committee Member Linnell commented on the deliberations of the Tribal Interior Budget Committee's discussion on public safety and their engagement with the Department of Justice around cross-deputizing law enforcement agencies so that all citizens are served in times of need, regardless of whether they are Tribal or non-Tribal citizens. She also commented on the limits to P.L. 280 states and noted that many of the concerns discussed had been brought up during other committee meetings as well.

Acting ASIA Davis reflected on the importance of subsistence foods, relating fishing and seafood in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest to his experience in bison hunting in the Great Plains. He highlighted the importance of conducting Tribal consultation in industrial development, noting that consultation and collaboration can lead to more productive negotiations that avoid costly and risky litigation.

Committee Member Teves expressed his hope that the Interior's Hawaiian Homelands Division can offer strong connections to protect ocean-based food resources.

Chair Kissee expressed concerns about federal budget proposals reducing available funding significantly and labeling land consolidation programs as failing. The Chair asked the federal government to reexamine why funds may have remained unused and to reflect on whether the structure of the program created impediments and how that program could be improved so that the funds *could* be well utilized in the future.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

DFO Griffin opened the public comment period at 2:00 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.

Councilmember Jonas Hill of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin shared comments regarding support for the expansion of 638 authorities in the FPDPIR program. He shared that his grandmother of 89 years stated, "It's nice to be able to go into the food distribution center with a shopping cart and to be able to pick and choose among the high-quality foods available through this program." The Onedia Nation was among the

first participants, and they were able to take products from their own farms, such as grass-fed beef, and use the 638 FDPIR funds to provide that beef to members of their nation through the grocery store-type model. These demonstration projects are a great way to provide high quality foods to members houses with limited financial resources, as well as increasing incomes to local producers of everything from apples to wild rice. Tribal members now know that the beef is produced without pesticides or hormones and where that food comes from. The Nation is looking at USDA programs to process the meat locally as well.

Carly Griffith Hotvedt, Executive Director of the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI), commented that some of the discussion during the morning focused on training of NRCS staff to serve Tribal producers. The IFAI is one of the organizations which has an existing agreement with the NRCS to facilitate Regional Conservation Advisory Committees and also to create trainings to build capacity within the NRCS staff to serve Tribal nations. IFAI would like to make this Committee and the new administration aware of those opportunities with existing partners. Additionally, IFAI conducted a research project on USDA's release of an updated Departmental Regulation on Tribal Consultation, Collaboration, and Communication. That Directive referenced a manual on consultation, which has not been published. IFAI requested that the manual be released for publication and not considered as impacted by Executive Orders limiting new regulatory actions.

Kari Jo Lawrence, Executive Director of the Intertribal Agriculture Council, reaffirmed that the IAC stands ready to partner with USDA to deliver technical assistance to Tribal farmers and ranchers across Indian country, continuing the multi-year partnership. IAC sees Tribal agriculture as critical to rural prosperity. Many Tribal producers have never received assistance from USDA, and IAC urges the USDA to deepen partnerships and relationships with Tribes and Tribal producers to hear firsthand about what is working on the ground, as well as what is not. IAC asks the administration to reconsider its funding cuts considering its Farmers First priority, when many funding streams from terminated grants provided customer service with a producer-focused support through trusted, Tribal-serving entities. IAC also called for a fresh look at Tribal-serving programs such as the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program, which has never been fully funded and provides fewer than 40 dedicated extension agents for all Indian country.

Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. of the Cherokee Nation commented that partnerships with USDA have been vital to agricultural progress. He therefore shared some concerns over funding cuts. The first was the Equity in Conservation fund from NRCS, which provided 3 years of funding to support an internship intended to provide a minimum of 28 Cherokee interns with substantive experience in a natural resource-related field. This was a future-looking program to build the next generation of professionals across the range of USDA and Cherokee nation programs. On April 18, 2025, the grant was terminated on the basis that it promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion. As a Tribal leader, he was frustrated that, after years and even decades of educating federal leaders and members of Congress that Tribal nations are not a race but rather

sovereign nations, it was not just frustrating, but it was infuriating. Cutting a program on that basis was offensive and undermines what they are trying to do. Similarly, the Cherokee Nation's Local Food Purchase Agreement program allowed them to keep food purchasing monies local, buy local, and ensure that producers can make a living. That program is working well, yet it is being terminated as of March 2025, even after the Cherokee Nation had been approved for $6 million of funding to invest in local agricultural production. Chief Hoskin stated that the USDA should reconsider its funding decisions. Communities who don't have access to grocery stores depended on the Local Food Purchase Agreement program to provide access to fresh, healthy foods. When a grant of this size is handed down, it takes some time to put it into place. The funding is being cut before organizations had time to stand up their capacity.

The Cherokee Nation is now running its own meat processing plant and returning value added through small, local plants. The closure of the local USDA office means that the assistance they need will not be available. Technical staff at USDA have been terminated, which means that local producers have a greater burden to access USDA resources than what they had previously. This change is against a background of generations where incredible burdens were imposed on producers. At a time when Tribes are hitting their stride, suddenly, they are getting fewer resources. He raised additional concerns relate to closures of local offices and cuts to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer funding.

Abi Fain, Chief Legal and Policy Officer for the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC), commented that their council was encouraged to hear USDA commit to more collaboration with BIA. IAC continues to advocate for a more streamlined approach to competent, timely, and culturally appropriate customer service. The need to reduce bureaucracy and increase technical assistance is critical. The IAC cannot overestimate the importance of these partnerships and hopes to see substantive movement going forward. Access to credit is vital, and due to the lack of streamlined communication between the Departments, Tribal producers wait up to five times longer than non-Tribal producers for loan approvals on fee simple land. This lag is due to backlogs in approving title reports at the BIA and delays access to timely credit, delaying decisions for up to a year.

The IAC recommends that joint training between the Departments to increase understanding of both programs. Ms. Fain noted that BIA was previously understaffed and likely counted on fewer resources following the cuts made by the incoming administration. IAC encouraged the USDA to immediately place an experienced, qualified Director at the helm of the Office of Tribal Relations.

Finally, the IAC asked for confirmation of cooperative agreements to provide certainty on continued funding. The ambiguity has already reduced capacity across rural America, and Indian country has been hit particularly hard. The apparent lack of senior leadership guidance to program officers have seemed to leave multiple programs on pause. The IAC strongly encouraged USDA to hold Tribal consultations on improving and expanding consultation on providing service to Indian country. IAC also asked

USDA to consider methods for hosting nationwide consultation which maximized Tribal leaders' time, in contrast to the previous 5-day consultation series which required a full week commitment by Tribal leaders to cover the breadth of the Department's mission.

Brad Hall, President of Blackfeet Community College, commented as one of the 1994 land-grant Tribal Colleges and Universities. This land-grant college started out of a trailer and has grown to a 13-facility campus made possible through partnership with USDA. The partnership with AIHEC and USDA has allowed Blackfeet College to provide students fuller access to education and food resources.

The College has significant grant funding, and one that was of great importance was part of equity grants that were cut. Mental health services and other student support are on the line. The College has a building that it is about to finish constructing, and if USDA funds are taken away, construction will cease. The purpose of the facility was for meat processing to provide jobs, income to producers, and healthy food to Tribal citizens. USDA funds were not just awarded to Blackfeet College but were entitled to it due to its land grant status. Without those funds, they will not be able to provide opportunities for producers to learn, to enhance their operations, and the opportunity to build more food sovereignty in their communities. As food costs go up, and the community has a diminished capacity to feed itself, the need for these programs is more critical.

President Hall noted that USDA has made significant progress since the *Keepseagle* settlement, and that it is disheartening to see some of that progress reversed. He welcomed Secretary Rollins to visit Tribal college campuses to show what these investments can achieve. Continued support from USDA is critical to maintaining the progress that Tribally-controlled colleges and universities have made.

Kirk Francis, Chief of the Penobscot Tribe in Maine and the President of the United South and Eastern Tribes, commented on the need for USDA to fill the void left by the elimination of the funding for the Local Food Purchase Agreement program. This program was established during the COVID pandemic to fill supply chain gaps and became important to supporting Tribal producers, encouraging many to get into small scale agriculture and fishing. With so many members suffering from health challenges like diabetes, it is critical to provide Tribal members with access to fresh, healthy foods. Rather than eliminate it, he urged Secretary Rollins to work with Tribes to develop a new program which provided access to fresh, healthy foods while also encouraging more Tribal citizens to get into agricultural production and fishing. These goals align with the President's Executive Orders on making America – and Native America – healthy.

Second, the Chief noted the importance of allowing Tribes to simultaneously access FDPIR and SNAP. Tribal citizens are only able to access one program, creating an administrative burden for Tribal governments. FDPIR only provides USDA foods, limiting choices and making it susceptible to supply chain disruptions, whereas SNAP is available nationwide. The Chief expressed a hope in working with the Secretary to expand local Tribal control of these programs.

Dave Chun, Department of Hawaiian Homelands, commented on the need for housing, transportation infrastructure, and economic self-determination which align with the Committee's interests. He noted that USDA Rural Development offered critical programs to fund such needs. At the forefront of this for the Native Hawaiian Community is preserving land and culture and supporting youth and elders.

Monica Rattling Hawk, citizen of the Oglala Sioux Tribe and part of the Buffalo Nations on the World Wildlife Fund, commented on the importance of the buffalo lifeways collaboration to restore native buffalo for Tribal nations and Native economies. She had commented during the February Committee meeting on the importance of restoring funding to the InterTribal Buffalo Council, since which time one of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program has been unfrozen. She thanked Secretary Rollins for that decision. However, she noted that two awards remain frozen due to reviews of Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act funding.

She respectfully requested that those awards be fully restored. At least 226 treaties have an agricultural provision, including promises for agricultural assistance through farming and ranching. To many Tribes, that means buffalo. Ranching and buffalo management is a growth opportunity for Indian Country. In addition to requesting that those funds be unfrozen, Ms. Rattling Hawk requests that USDA request further cuts and funding freezes to evaluate other unintended negative impacts to Tribes. She noted that some cuts to funding under the DEI executive orders with subawards to Tribes may have unintentionally resulted in cuts to Tribes. USDA could restore those funds.

Finally, regarding the President's budget proposal for Make America Health Again food boxes, she recommended USDA delegate that purchasing authority to Tribes. She requested USDA restore Local Food Purchasing Agreement FY 2025 program, respecting the fundamental shifts made by Tribes like the Tlingit and Haida to reorient their purchasing to local, traditional foods. The Oglala Sioux Tribe was able to use the funds to create Sacred Storm, a Tribally owned meat processing company. Other Tribes have utilized these funds to purchase Tribal meats for use in Tribal school meals.

Monte Randall, President of the College of the Muscogee Nation, commented on behalf of his college and as the co-chair of the USDA American Indian Higher Education Consortium Leadership Committee. The release of critical funding streams to Tribal Colleges and Universities was vital. He requests that USDA provide a report with reasoning explaining why funding was cut for programs which directly impact Tribal colleges. He shared concerns that while 1994 Tribal land grant institutions have limited resources, the FY26 budget proposal recommends funding cuts at $2M. These land-grant institutions provide important education and employment, but they have never received sufficient funding. USDA and AIHEC formed a leadership group to foster collaboration and advance shared priorities. In keeping with that MOA, they request the scheduling of that meeting within the next quarter. 1994 institutions are working to achieve parity with other land grant institutions, receiving only 3% of extension and 1% of research funding allocated to all land grant institutions.

AIHEC requests that USDA fill the Director position within the Office of Tribal Relations to provide strong, consistent relationship supporting Tribal sovereignty and furthering the government-to-government relationship. Tribal colleges chartered by Tribal nations operate within this relationship, where treaties promised access to education. AIHEC asks USDA to consider these commitments in its workforce reorganization to ensure that these programs are not harmed, and AIHEC further requests that terminations of USDA staff who support for 1994 programs be reinstated. Finally, AIHEC notes that the TAC has a vacancy left by a Tribal college president and requests USDA fill that vacancy with a Tribal college representative.

Elmer Guy, President of Navajo Technical University, commented that he concurred with Presidents Hall and Randall for their comments. He also asked USDA to honor its commitments to Tribal nations and their rights under treaties. As a land grant institution, some grant activities were terminated, and the university does not know why.
One was for a summer camp, and the other was for internships. Navajo Technical University offers degrees in animal science to train young students in the field, ideally to become a veterinarian and meet the shortage of that profession in Indian Country. The summer camp, which was open to all Americans, brought in students from across the country to offer that opportunity to students.

Separately, the President's FY26 budget proposed eliminating critical programs within Rural Development. The Navajo Nation has significant needs in broadband infrastructure. Without that, the university cannot provide online instruction to remote students, and they need to continue to build the infrastructure that is lacking in rural communities. If Rural Development opportunities are eliminated, then economic development in Indian country will be limited. Finally, indirect cost rates must provide parity for Tribal colleges, and President Guy asked that the Agriculture Department not follow the Department of Energy in limiting those costs as it has done with the National Science Foundation.

TAC DELIBERATIONS ON PUBLIC COMMENTS

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

Committee Member Sawney noted the importance of assessing where federal funding freezes continue and how they impact Tribal colleges and universities, impacting Indian country technical expertise. Considering Secretary Rollins memo distinguishing Tribes from the impacts of the President's DEI Executive Order, and public comments which stated that funding to Tribes and Tribal entities had been frozen or terminated with an explanation of DEI activities, the Committee may request a report assessing the size of those cuts and their impact on Indian Country.

Committee Member Barquin noted that the USDA leadership may not have been aware of the impacts of those funding freezes had on Indian country and the major effects in arresting positive progress. The Local Food Purchase Agreement program in particular

supported producers at the local level, providing food to Tribal members without access to grocery stores. The Committee may consider creating a specific program in support of Tribal and Native communities. The Oneida Nation shared that the number of producers supported through that program increased from 2 to 36

Chair Kissee reflected on Secretary Rollins' comments from her recent hearing stating that many LFPA program funds were unspent, and he asked whether that lack of spending reflected a need for improvements in the program design. Additionally, he commented that the food system is not designed to buy from local producers, but the COVID pandemic showed the need to rely more on decentralized supplies. LFPA was aiming at a target or a market that did not exist, and it does take time to build up that infrastructure. After LFPA was canceled, many commented on non-Native and Native producers alike who had changed their business models and scaled up to meet State and Tribal demand, expanding their operations toward meeting consumer needs. Taking time to scale up those business models may have delayed the expenditure of funds. He commented that LFPA was a very sound program that was trying to change fundamental models, like the school food model that no longer relies on fresh foods and scratch cooking in favor of institutional meal services – challenges that cannot be addressed in just two years of funding.

Committee Member Teves asserted that, if Tribal nations are not considered DEI, then Tribal funding should not have been cut under the rationale of DEI activities. He asked to better understand the reasons why the Local Food Purchase Agreements were cut, such as Hawai'i's statement that it could not find sufficient producers within the geographic restrictions, and that schools did not have the capacity to perform scratch cooking. He asked that USDA looked at where the problems were and to consider addressing those.

Committee Member Jacobs reflected on Secretary Rollins testimony to Congress as well, noting the needs to reflect seasonality in production, the rural and remote nature of producers, the restrictions of 400 miles in distance, and whether Tribes in central or North Dakota, for example, have sufficient producers within the local purchasing area to expend those funds. Chief Hoskins' commented that USDA had cut funds under the rationale of DEI, seemingly showing that mistakes were made.

President Gravelle commented on the Facilities Loan Program [Community Facilities Program], requesting better messaging on how to utilize the program and to align with 105(l) leasing, where the Federal government provides opportunities for Tribes to pursue Interior 105(l) leasing funds in conjunction with and collateral for a Rural Development Community Facilities Loan program. The program provides funds that Tribes may not be able to access through a conventional borrower and at a more advantageous rate. If the funds are not being used, President Gravelle asked whether USDA could do more to provide information and access to Tribes to utilize the program.

Committee Member Linell reflected that the Local Food Purchase Agreement program was just getting started. The program had encouraged young people to go back to their

traditions and ways of harvest, providing food to elders who had been removed from home and relocated – while allowing them to reconnect to their food sources from urban locations. Their excitement was palpable and shared by citizens who have been displaced outside their homelands. If programs are still under contract, then those contracts should be honored. There's nothing better than bringing back traditional foods to Make America Healthy Again. She also suggested that, when looking at Alaska, USDA remember the size of Alaska and that having a service provider in Juneau puts her District Conservationist at a distance equivalent to traveling from Kansas to Georgia, presenting a major impediment to site visits and services. She further commented on the importance of expanding 638 authorities within USDA programs.

Vice Chair Baldy commented that the Hoopa Tribe program was successful in delivering boxes of locally sourced produce and eggs weekly, allowing elders to access fresh produce without having to labor in the gardens. The lack of administrative overhead funds within the LFPA program strained the Tribe's ability to provide support for food distribution, limiting the Tribe's ability to offer additional days for food distribution.

Committee Member Barquin commented that indirect cost rates need to be better understood. Tribal governments' rates must be run as a part of a broader suite of programs. He also noted the number of public comments on staffing cuts, office closures, where federal staff are missing, and what technical assistance may be available to fill those gaps. He noted that federal staff supporting these programs seem to be in limbo. As part of assessing cuts to programs, he reflected on Mr. Chun's comments regarding the 29,000-person waiting list for housing and wondered whether USDA programs could fill that gap. He also commented on the need to expand USDA's inter-agency memorandum with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to encompass more activities, such as forestry.

Committee Member Scott commented that there was progress made through this time that would make the future deployment of these dollars more efficient and more effective. Looking at the impact of the cuts to these programs to the administration's stated priorities of supporting farmers and rural prosperity, the processes and plans can be easily restarted if these programs were to be stood back up. Taxpayer funds have been put into the design and early implementation of these programs, and if they are terminated, USDA will lose that investment.

RECESS

Upon motion duly made and carried without objection, the meeting recessed at approximately 4:40 P.M. Eastern Standard Time.

MAY 8, 2025

The TAC reconvened at approximately 9:00 A.M. Eastern Standard Time.

Committee Members Present:

Trenton Kissee, Committee Chair
Meagen Baldy, Committee Vice Chair
William Barquin
President Whitney Gravelle, Bay Mils Indian Community
Ben Jacobs
Karen Linnell
Council Member David Pourier, Oglala Sioux Tribe
Whitney Sawney
Kelsey Scott
Glenn Teves

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)
Jeffrey Harris, Program Analyst
Taylor Schad, Program Analyst
Elena Krajeski, Administrative Officer
Trevor Benson, Special Assistant

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

Scott Davis, Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the Interior, exercising the delegated authority of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs (ASIA)
Johnna Blackhair, Deputy Bureau Director, Office of Trust Services, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)

TRIBAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE DELIBERATION

Chair Kissee called the meeting to order and reviewed proposed recommendations by Committee members. The Chair noted that certain 2024 recommendations from the Committee would benefit from further context and clarity, such as NRCS enrollment requirements and streamlining requirements for Tribal producers operating on Tribal lands under an Agricultural Resource Management Plans and USDA NRCS conservation plans. Additionally, the Committee recommended urgent consultation with the USDA regarding its workforce optimization plans to allow for timely and meaningful input.

NRCS Cost-Share/Practices. Committee members discussed a lack of clarity around their previous recommendations for NRCS to better support new and beginning farmers and ranchers accessing fertilizer and irrigation support. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendations unanimously:

- USDA should remove historical practice, method, and/or production requirements from all cost-share program eligibility and ranking.
- USDA should remove "one year of control" requirements from all conservation programs to encourage new and beginner producer participation in conservation programs.

Reorganization/Reduction in Force. Committee members discussed proposed reorganization and reduction in force announced by the administration. In discussion, Committee members acknowledged that multiple consultations may be necessary, but requiring Tribal leaders participate over a weeklong period may hamper their participation. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should host a series of Tribal Consultations throughout Indian Country related to USDA workforce and programming changes, organizational structure, and efficiency for Tribes and Tribal producers prior to making final decisions.

The Committee reserved the right to make recommendations on specific USDA proposals later.

New Farmer/Tribal Program Access. Committee members discussed that existing statute served as a barrier for new farmers purchasing or gaining access to agricultural land. Upon recommendation duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendations unanimously:

- Congress should examine Title 26 of the US code to consider ways to incentivize landowners to sell or transfer agricultural ground to new and beginning farmers and ranchers. Lawmakers should consider reducing or eliminating Capital Gains taxes, Estate and Gift taxes, and other taxes related to the transfer or sale of agricultural land to reduce the tax burden of individuals or entities specifically transferring lands to American new and beginning farmers and ranchers. Provide enhanced capital gains tax exclusions or deferrals for landowners who sell or lease land to qualified beginning farmers and ranchers. Offer estate tax credits or deductions if agricultural land is sold or transferred to beginning farmers.
- Allotment consolidation programs should be evaluated to reduce administrative burdens and red tape for streamlined program utilization.
- USDA should require and implement targeted training for FSA credit staff on existing policies related to alternative collateral acceptance, with a focus on increasing credit access for Native producers and reducing dependence on trust/restricted land collateralization.

Land Fractionation. Committee members noted that existing resources have not sufficiently addressed land fractionation issues. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should provide guidance to FSA and other offices servicing Indian Country related to these programs and encourage greater use of the programs to increase agricultural production through efficiencies in land ownership and management. The USDA should also work with BIA and USDOI to combine programs to increase agricultural production.

Recognition of Tribal Business Interests. Committee members expressed that Tribal government owned businesses are not consistently read as eligible for USDA business or Tribal government development programs. Committee Member Linnell questioned if the Committee's interest here was inclusive of Alaska Native Corporations, included under the definition of Indian tribe in the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. Chair Kissee encouraged the recommendation to only include business entities owned by a federally-recognized Tribe, e.g., Section 17 Corporations. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA programs and policies should align with Treasury and other programs that recognize businesses formed under Tribal law and the unique nature of many Indian Country businesses. This will reduce bureaucratic hurdles to rural economic self-sufficiency by ensuring Indian Country businesses are eligible for programs.

Intertribal Trade. While USDA recognizes the authority of Tribes to regulate hemp, Committee members expressed that USDA does not take a broader recognition for tribal or intertribal trade. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should implement and/or develop programs and policies that reduce bureaucratic hurdles to intertribal trade, including through recognition of Tribal government regulations that achieve the same or similar purposes of federal regulations.

Barriers to Customer Service. Committee members identified that recent flexibilities under the EXPLORE Act provide Tribes with greater access to resourcing. Where multiple programs may be available for a similar purpose, the Committee also noted that these authorities may hold disparate reporting requirements that could be better streamlined. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA, in collaboration and consultation with Tribal governments, should conduct a comprehensive review of partnership programs available to Indian Country, determine what requirements may be barriers to entering into those partnerships and develop strategic plans to eliminate those barriers.

Cost Sharing Agricultural Resource Management Plans. Committee members discussed opportunities where USDA could better support tribal interests in developing

or implementing Agricultural Resource Management Plans. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should recognize ARMPs as Programmatic Baselines
    - Accept Tribal ARMPs in lieu of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) conservation plans, eliminating duplicative planning.
    - Authorize ARMPs to qualify lands for eligibility under NRCS, RD, and FSA programs.
- ARMP Funding Collaboration
    - Allow USDA to cost-share ARMP development under CSP, EQIP, or Tribal Technical Assistance Initiative funds.
    - Joint USDA-BIA training and certification for ARMP authors (including Tribal conservation staff or consultants).
    - Include monitoring and adaptive management support through local USDA field offices

Credit Access. Committee members discussed the need for dedicated USDA staff to provide agriculture financing in credit deserts or other credit deprived areas. Upon motions duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and unanimously approved the following recommendations:

- USDA should prioritize maintaining and expanding staffing levels and services at FSA and BIA offices that serve Indian Country, particularly in credit-deprived rural areas.
- USDA should develop and implement a strategy to prevent the closure or consolidation of FSA and BIA offices in rural Tribal communities, ensuring continued local access to essential agricultural and financial services.

Additionally, Committee members discussed the important role Congress holds in modernizing existing credit authorities to support greater accessibility. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and unanimously approved the following recommendation:

- Congress should take swift, bipartisan action to enact the following no-cost legislative reforms to modernize FSA lending and enhance rural access to credit:
    - Eliminate Direct Farm Ownership and Operating Loan term limits by eliminating the cap on the number of times a borrower can get a Direct Operating or Direct Farm Ownership loan.
    - Authorize refinancing of debt as a direct Farm Ownership loan program purpose.
    - Increase the Direct Beginning Farmer Down Payment Loan Program Loan Limit to match the Direct Farm Ownership loan limit.
    - Remove the Emergency Loan program requirement for written credit denial and adjust the production loss percent threshold from 30 percent to an amount to be determined by the Secretary.
    - Remove prohibition of new loans for applicants that have received debt forgiveness when at least 7 years have passed since receiving debt forgiveness.

- Reduce the Direct Farm Ownership loan requirements to require an applicant to have one year of farming experience (and not three), or that the applicant have an established relationship with a mentor approved by the Secretary, or is a veteran who has been honorably discharged.
- Increase the lifetime limitation on debt forgiveness per borrower from $300,000 to $600,000.
- Increase the Microloan Limit from $50,000 to $100,000.
- Modify the statutory language describing the interest rate requirements for limited resource loans, microloans to beginning farmers and veteran farmers, and Indian Tribal Land Acquisition loans, including the establishment of an interest rate ceiling.
- Revise beginning farmer definition to require individuals of an entity to be beginning farmers without regard to relationship.
- Require Preferred Guaranteed Lenders to obtain concurrence to foreclosure by removing the authority of preferred certified lenders to initiate liquidation without Farm Service Agency concurrence.
- Provide flexibility on the use of funds reserved for Beginning Farmers by revising beginning farmer lending targets required to "to the extent practicable.

Community Development Financial Institutions. Committee members recognized that Community Development Financial Institutions, particularly Native CDFIs, fill an important role in addressing credit access, including gaps in existing USDA lending restrictions. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and unanimously approved the following recommendation:

- USDA and Congress should prioritize formal engagement with Native CDFIs and the Native CDFI Network by:
  - Expanding USDA partnerships with CDFIs to co-deliver credit and technical assistance;
  - Increasing appropriations and programmatic resources for USDA relending programs targeted to CDFIs; and
  - Establishing dedicated re-lending capital pools to support Native CDFIs in serving producers excluded by traditional credit systems.

Award Terminations/Freezes. The Committee reflected on public comment decrying award terminations. Committee members noted the difficulty in providing recommendations on a matter that was not fully quantified. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should complete a comprehensive assessment in consultation and coordination with Tribes of terminated contracts and grants that impacted Indian country and work to reverse those terminations to provide funding directly to tribes, tribal organizations and Native Hawaiian entities.

Filling Tribal Impacting Roles. In its discussion on funding implications, the Committee discussed the necessity for dedicated staff to fill those roles. Where USDA

could not hire identified provisions, Committee members posited that Tribal partnerships may supplement this effort. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should also complete an assessment of federal workforce reductions that negatively impact Indian country and take action to reverse those impacts through increased hiring, contract with Indian Country technical assistance providers, and increased funding to tribal governments to directly implement those programs.

Reprogramming of Tribal Awards. Where public comment identified that USDA activity terminated or otherwise reprogrammed agreements, the Committee posited that reprogrammed funding should be for the benefit of Tribes and Tribal interests. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendations unanimously:

- USDA should reprogram recaptured IRA and IIJA funds from terminated contracts and grants into a Tribal Discretionary Program administered by the Office of Tribal Relations to advance economic development in Indian Country.
- USDA should expand cooperative staffing agreements and joint position funding with Tribal governments, particularly to support Tribal Departments of Agriculture and Natural Resources in building local capacity and delivering USDA programs more effectively.

Rancher Inclusion in Disaster Assistance Funding. The Committee discussed that recent USDA agricultural disaster assistance funding targeted row crop farmers to the exclusion of livestock producers or ranchers. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should ensure that all disaster assistance funding and programmatic services, including market access expansion efforts, are explicitly inclusive of livestock producers and do not disproportionately favor crop producers.

Rancher Inclusion in Conservation Programs. The Committee suggested that existing conservation programs and practices prioritize crop producers to the exclusion, at least in part, of rancher. The Committee acknowledged the impact that prairies and grasslands have on both advancing rural economies and carbon sequestration. While Committee Member Scott acknowledged that these recommendations may have already be addressed, she encouraged USDA continue considering this intent in future rulemaking and program delivery. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendations unanimously:

- USDA should revise conservation cost-share standards and practice scenarios to increase their relevance to expansive rangeland and livestock systems, ensuring that these practices are eligible for meaningful and equitable support.
- USDA should establish separate ranking categories for livestock conservation proposals, including those related to rangeland and grazing systems, to prevent systematic deprioritization relative to cropland-focused applications.

Review of Ag Census Data in New Initiatives. The Committee posited that a more directed review of Census of Agriculture findings would ensure USDA programs benefit all producers, particularly those across Indian Country. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- USDA should use Ag Census and other relevant data to inform the equitable design of new initiatives, ensuring adequate support for the livestock sector—especially in Indian Country where it is a dominant agricultural activity.

Tribal Roles Advising USDA. The Committee recognized that both the Director of Tribal Relations and the Tribal Advisory Committee are statutorily required to advise the Secretary on tribal issues. The former, the Committee recognized required a political appointment to fill, while other career vacancy tribal liaison roles remain across the Department. While the Committee is statutorily authorized, Committee members also expressed awareness that its charter must be refiled every two years with the U.S. General Services Administration to remain operational. Additionally, the Committee recognized a current vacancy, previously held by a member representing Tribal College expertise, and three future vacancies. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendations unanimously:

- USDA should prioritize the immediate appointment of a qualified and experienced Director to lead the Office of Tribal Relations.
- USDA should prioritize the immediate hiring of vacant USDA Tribal Liaison positions within all agencies.
- The administration should commit to maintaining or increasing the budget of the Office of Tribal Relations to ensure it has the capacity to fulfill its role as a conduit between Indian Country and the Secretary/Department regarding programs and policies impacting Indian Tribes, and ensure the Department meets Tribal consultation requirements in collaboration with the Department's mission area programs and agencies.
- The USDA Tribal Advisory Committee Charter should be swiftly reauthorized to ensure the continuity of this body’s statutory role in advising the Secretary on Tribal issues across USDA programs.
- The administration should move expeditiously to fill all vacant seats on the USDA Tribal Advisory Committee to ensure full regional and institutional representation, particularly for regions and institutional representation currently lacking a voting representative.
- The TAC currently has a vacancy, formerly filled by a representative from a Tribal College and University (TCU). This vacancy should be expeditiously filled to ensure that the Committee hears concerns and understands the impacts of USDA and congressional action on TCUs. The current vacancy is required to be appointed by the ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee. Therefore, the TAC recommends to Congress that the current vacancy be filled with an individual with expertise in 1994 land grant institutions.

Coordination with DOI. Recognizing 2025 marked the first year where USDA principals joined a DOI Secretary’s Tribal Advisory Committee and that there is broad

potential for collaboration with DOI, Committee members reflected that the existing Memorandum of Understanding only speaks to agricultural considerations. Upon motion duly made and seconded, the Committee considered and approved the following recommendation unanimously:

- The Secretary of Agriculture should work with the Secretary of Interior to expand the interagency Memorandum of Understanding to analyze additional areas of cooperation including, but not limited to: forestry and wildland firefighting; land access and ownership; water rights and infrastructure; and cultural resource protection and sacred sites.

Committee members discussed whether a recommendation should be enacted on the Local Food Purchase Assistance program and the Gus Schuhmacher Nutrition Incentives Program (GusNIP). Acting Director Rakola noted that GusNIP is statutorily authorized in the farm bill and anticipated to continue, pending appropriations. The Committee considered raising the following recommendation but ultimately decided not to act.

- USDA should examine LFPA for bureaucratic barriers and allocate funds for local, state, tribal entities to locally source food for feeding programs.

Committee members considered adding greater specificity to this recommendation. Committee Member Barquin questioned if 'local' is defined by law, to which Acting Director Rakola responded that no such statutory definition existed here. Committee members posited four follow-up recommendations without making motion to adopt:

- USDA should redesign a Farmer's first food purchasing assistance program that practices greater flexibility in local food purchasing programs to allow Tribal, state, and local governments to procure food directly from regional producers, ensuring culturally relevant and nutritionally appropriate food access.
- Future iterations of USDA local food purchasing programs should provide sufficient multi-year timelines to allow for sustainable market development and producer readiness, recognizing that Tribal and rural supply chains may need longer ramp-up periods.
- USDA should revise geographic sourcing requirements—such as the 400-mile radius rule—by granting Tribes the discretionary authority to define local and regional distances that align with the unique geographic, cultural, and economic realities of their food systems. This flexibility will ensure program design supports actual procurement capacity and community needs in Indian Country.
- USDA should offer transition support or bridge funding for producers impacted by the sudden pause or cancellation of LFPA programs, particularly those who made capital investments based on USDA's initial commitments.

Committee member discussion shifted to a proposal in the President's FY2026 budget recommending that the USDA's feeding programs, including the Tribal feeding program FDPIR, be moved to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Committee members unanimously agreed that USDA should retain its feeding program authorities and that USDA is best suited to represent the needs of agriculture producers in accessing agricultural markets, whether in the private or public sector. Through this

discussion Chair Kissee suggested, without motion, that the Committee considered the following recommendations:

- USDA and HHS should jointly pursue a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define interagency roles, preserve USDA's leadership in food systems development, and ensure alignment between agricultural investments and nutrition programming in Indian Country.
- USDA should retain oversight and delivery of all food and nutrition assistance programs currently serving Indian Country, and coordinate with—but not be subordinate to—HHS in achieving shared public health and food security goals.
- The Secretary of Agriculture should establish a dedicated funding stream to support Tribal food system development and procurement infrastructure to ensure strides are taken towards increasing the nutritional value of food served to our students, reinforcing USDA's leadership in advancing food sovereignty and regional nutrition strategies in Indian Country.

Committee Member Teves questioned where home and community gardens fit in these discussions. Chair Kissee suggested that tribal extension both enhances food security and supports local, self-governance efforts to address diabetes through expanding local, healthy food access. Chair Kissee suggested the Committee consider a recommendation, without motion, recognizing the importance of extension services:

- USDA should fully invest in and expand access to nutrition education curriculum and educators (such as the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP)), recognizing its critical role in delivering culturally relevant nutrition education, food system literacy, and producer engagement in Tribal communities.

Committee Member Teves affirmed support for expanding tribal extension services, reflecting on the comment yesterday that only 3% of research funding goes to Tribal Colleges and Universities. Committee Member Barquin separately recognized that, due to the Supreme Court's determination on the Chevron deference, Committee recommendations should carry a higher level of specificity.

With increased frequency of administrative actions, Committee members suggested creating a subcommittee of the whole to provide consensus in review information. DFO Griffin reiterated to the Committee that subcommittee meetings are only intended to support subcommittee members in drafting recommendations that would then be deliberated by the Committee-at-large. Pursuant to the Federal Advisory Committee Act and GSA guidelines, if the subcommittees began formalizing recommendations that would be carried by the Committee without further deliberation, subcommittee meetings must be opened to the public. The DFO held that the Committee's subcommittees should retain their current purpose of only supporting information gathering.

ADJOURN

Upon motion duly made and seconded, the TAC adjourned at approximately 12:00 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