



Agriculture is at the heart of many tribal economies and family traditions. Utah State University Engineering Student, Semira Crank, of the Navajo Nation surveys dairy farms near Logan, Utah, as a temporary student employee with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Credit: USDA.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is a fast-growing sector in Indian Country, and has been the second leading employer for tribes. The 2007 Census of Agriculture shows a dramatic 88 percent increase in the number of American Indian farmers (79,703 more than in 2002).

Because 40 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives live in rural areas, tribal governments and farmers look to active partnerships with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to sustain and advance common interests across the broad array of services that this federal agency provides to tribal governments.²⁵

USDA administers programs that cover many essential areas that affect American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, such as food distribution programs, land conservation, forestry, agricultural outreach, and rural development. Tribal governments place great value on the importance of USDA due to the breadth of services available to American Indians and Alaska Natives; the agency does not solely focus on agriculture, in addition to farmers and ranchers, the agency also serves tribal governments, natural resource managers, youth, colleges, water infrastructure providers, tribal utilities providers, energy suppliers, and tribal communities.

In 2007, nearly 61,472 American Indians operated farms on more than 58 million acres of land and sold \$3.26 billion of agricultural products, including \$1.46 billion of crops and \$1.71 billion of livestock and poultry.²⁴

Key Recommendations

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Appropriations Bill

Office of Tribal Relations

- Fund the USDA's Office of Tribal Relations at \$1.5 million.

USDA's Office of Tribal Relations (OTR), reporting to the Secretary, serves a linchpin role in expanding all USDA program support throughout Indian Country. The OTR's initial funding level of \$1 million in FY 2010 was slashed by half in both FY 2011 and FY 2012, leaving the OTR with insufficient personnel and resources to support its mission.

Nonetheless, the OTR and Rural Development (RD) orchestrated unprecedented tribal consultations and outreach on implementation of the Substantially Underserved Trust Areas (SUTA) provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill. This will allow RD to provide greater flexibility and more favorable loan terms around much-needed utilities infrastructure in trust areas. Lack of sufficient funding presents a barrier to OTR expanding their work to provide the programs, technical assistance, content or even the basic communications to ensure that non-Internet education and training are available to tribes on all USDA programs. Active tribal participation in USDA funding opportunities is required to assist the build-out of broadband infrastructure, and support the workforce development required to fully utilize Internet capabilities, business programs, and financing necessary to bring Native goods and services to market.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Appropriations Bill

USDA Rural Development, Water and Environmental Program (WEP)

- *Maintain funding for tribal set-asides for water, wastewater, and solid waste management for Indian Country and Alaska Native villages.*

USDA's Water and Environmental Program (WEP) provides a combination of loans, grants, and loan guarantees for drinking water, sanitary sewer, solid waste, and storm drainage facilities in tribal and rural areas and cities and towns of 10,000 or less. WEP also makes grants to non-profit organizations to provide technical assistance and training to assist rural communities with water, wastewater, and solid waste management. Last year, WEP provided tribal-specific grant set-asides of \$16 million for Indian Country and \$20 million for Alaska Native villages.

More than 12 percent of tribal homes lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, which is a rate more than 20 times the national average.

More than 12 percent of tribal homes lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, which is a rate more than 20 times the national average. For example, many Alaska Native villages must transport human waste in large containers to open pit sewage lagoons. The federal government's failure to address this situation is unacceptable, especially in light of its trust obligation to tribal nations. The existing federal budget does not make a significant dent in addressing this fundamental deficit in quality of life for Native peoples. A cut in this budget may make it worse, exposing Native peoples and youth to unhealthy water and its resultant detrimental impacts to human health, economic development, and community morale.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Appropriations Bill

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

- *Maintain funding for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) of at least \$1.4 billion.*
- *Maintain funding for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) of at least \$85 million.*
- *Maintain funding for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) of at least \$768 million.*

Between FY 2010 and FY 2011, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) saw an 85 percent increase in tribal participation in their programs, which could be attributed to USDA's unprecedented outreach to tribal governments. American Indians and Alaska Natives hold their natural resources as sacred and heavily depend upon them for economic, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. Historically, federal natural resources funding for tribes has been limited, as tribes are ineligible for dozens of federal natural resource programs. Other funding for tribal natural resource programs under Bureau of Indian Affairs' appropriations consistently experiences the smallest budget increases of all the Department of the Interior bureaus.

Tribes should have access to new opportunities afforded by USDA's NRCS programs, despite the harsh budget climate and potential funding cuts.

As the number of Native farmers has increased by 200 percent in the last decade, tribes request that the funding levels remain at existing levels for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). EQIP provides financial and technical help to tribes and others to install or implement structural and management conservation practices on eligible agricultural land. Tribes also request maintaining current levels for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), which enables tribes and other eligible participants to protect, restore, develop or enhance habitat for upland wildlife, wetland wildlife, threatened and endangered species, fish, and other types of wildlife in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. Another important NRCS program is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), which helps reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water quality, increase wildlife habitat, and reduce damages caused by floods and other natural disasters. Tribes' use of the CSP increased 172 percent from FY 2010 through FY 2011, with 246 contracts to tribes totaling \$10.4 million.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Appropriations Bill

Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program

- *Increase the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP) to \$5 million.*

Congress mandates research and extension services in every county in the nation. These services support farmers, natural resources managers, youth (via 4-H youth programs), and communities. While there are more than 3,100 extension offices nationwide, fewer than 30 extension agents serve Indian reservations, with current funding of only \$3 million. This means that more than 97 percent of America's counties have had robust programs since 1914, while less than 4 percent of tribal members living on their reservations have access to these programs. An increase to \$5 million would begin to address this persistent inequity.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agriculture Appropriations Bill

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

- *Increase the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) to \$124 million.*

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) provides USDA foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations and to American Indian and Alaska Native households residing in approved areas near reservations or in Oklahoma. As an alternative to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), FDPIR is currently serving approximately 276 tribes that do not have easy access to SNAP offices or authorized food stores. This program should receive a 6 percent increase to offset rising food costs and ensure continual food purchase and program operation. The \$15 million increase should be used to develop a traditional food market within the food packet. Congress authorized the USDA to purchase traditional and locally-grown foods, but it has been difficult for tribes to create a sustainable supply of traditional foods due to the lack of infrastructure and tribal capacity.