



News Release

U.S. Department of Agriculture
100 Sun Avenue, Suite 310
Albuquerque, NM 87109 www.rd.usda.gov/nm

Contact:
Ernie Watson 505-761-4951

At White House Tribal Nations Summit, USDA Fulfills Long-Standing Tribal Requests to Strengthen Food Sovereignty and Expand Indigenous Roles in Forest Management

Department Announces Grants and Key Progress in Meat Processing for Indigenous Animals, Expanded Forest Management Tribal Partnerships, Tribal Bison Conservation Efforts, and Tribal Advisory Committee Appointments

WASHINGTON, Dec. 6, 2023 – U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced ways the Biden-Harris Administration is fulfilling long-standing Tribal requests for USDA to support and better partner with Tribal Nations in empowering Tribal food sovereignty and co-stewardship of federal lands and waters. Secretary Vilsack announced the first grant recipients under the [Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program](#), as well as advances in Forest Service co-stewardship with Tribes, including 120 new agreements totaling more than \$68 million in investments. Secretary Vilsack also announced the inaugural appointees of the new Tribal Advisory Committee.

Secretary Vilsack made the announcements at the 2023 White House Tribal Nations Summit, where Tribal leaders gathered for Nation-to-Nation conversations with President Biden and senior administration officials on key priorities, new policies and critical issues facing Tribal Nations.

“As Tribes have requested, we are reshaping our programs to incorporate Tribal and Indigenous perspectives, remove barriers, and encourage Tribal self-determination. USDA is working directly with Tribal Nations to support their decisions on how best to co-steward federal lands and forests and the traditions that have been passed down from ancestors and elders,” Secretary Vilsack said. “These investments will also create economic opportunities in Tribal communities, elevate the agency’s work to increase co-stewardship in forest management, while also increasing the availability of affordable, healthy protein sources from Indigenous animals that have been the backbone of Tribal food systems for generations.”

Coinciding with the White House Tribal Nations Summit, [USDA shared a comprehensive list of USDA’s Indian Country accomplishments](#). This includes key efforts announced today:

USDA Announces Members of the Inaugural Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC)

Today, Secretary Vilsack, the Chair and Ranking member of Senate Indian Affairs, and the House and Senate Agricultural Committees named [11 new members to the inaugural USDA Tribal Advisory Committee](#). This is a permanent committee created by the 2018 Farm Bill to ensure Tribal perspectives are well represented at USDA and to ensure the Department’s policies and decisions are informed by the unique Nation-to-Nation relationship.

USDA Makes Historic Funding Available for Harvesting and Processing Indigenous Animals

Four Tribal Nations are receiving [Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grants](#) in the first round of funding announcements today:

- **The Alutiiq Tribe of Old Harbor in Alaska** is receiving a \$1 million grant to buy and modernize an unused processing facility that will help the community address food shortages due to climate change. Members of the Tribe live in a remote village accessible only by boat or small plane. Severe weather can delay food deliveries, and algae are depleting fishing stocks. The funding will allow the Tribe to increase the amount of local game and fish they can process using traditional methods. This includes meat from the Sitkalidak Bison Herd the Tribe manages.
- **The Tribal Government of St. Paul Island in Alaska** is receiving a grant of more than \$668,000 to re-establish a local reindeer meat processing operation at the Aleut Community Store. The Aleut community will use the grant to develop a program to harvest, process, market and sell local reindeer products. The project will increase the availability of locally sourced organic meat products and drive profits back to the island. It also will help Tribal members remember, relearn and practice traditional herding techniques important to the cultural heritage of the island.
- **The Tolowa Dee-ni’ Nation in southern Oregon and northern California** is receiving a \$2.4 million grant to expand a Food Sovereignty Program that provides the community a space and resources to learn traditional processing methods for local game and fish, including black-tailed deer, Roosevelt Elk and chinook salmon. The grant will allow the Tribe to pay for three staff positions, buy a mobile processing unit and outfit a recently built 6,000-square-foot Food Sovereignty Building with new equipment. The improvements will also allow the

community, which doesn't have a grocery store offering fresh produce or meat, to double the number of families they can feed.

- **The Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana** is receiving a grant of more than \$191,000 to purchase a composter and walk-in freezer for the new Fort Peck meat processing facility, where they process bison, elk, deer, antelope and pheasant. The project will give people on the reservation a local Tribal-owned business for their meat processing and storage needs. The upgraded facility will also give the Fort Peck Tribes Fish and Game Department a local place to take bison to be processed and distributed to families in need.

Background: Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program

USDA partnered with Oweesta Corp., a Native Community Development Financial Institution, to provide grants under the [Indigenous Animals Harvesting and Meat Processing Grant Program](#). Oweesta Corp. is selecting the grantees under the program.

USDA designed the program to support priorities voiced by Tribal Nations during consultations held over two years. It aims to expand processing opportunities using modern and traditional harvesting methods for animals native to North America such as bison, reindeer and salmon.

The program reflects the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to work in partnership with Tribal Nations to advance prosperity and dignity for all Native peoples. It also supports the Administration's priority to [build a fairer, more competitive and more resilient food system](#) by supporting local farms and businesses.

USDA Empowers Food Sovereignty and Bison Conservation

At the Summit, Secretary Vilsack announced a partnership with the Sitka Conservation Society to create a new curriculum to educate rural citizens, especially Alaska Native youth about the Federal Subsistence Management Board, which manage fish and wildlife for subsistence uses on federal public lands and waters in Alaska. Secretary Vilsack also announced a new public-private Tribal bison conservation partnership with the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). Both agencies are collaborating with the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), The Nature Conservancy, and other buffalo-focused nonprofit organizations. This relationship will improve upon the federal investments already being made by USDA-DOI Buffalo Initiative in grasslands and working lands restoration, Tribal buffalo conservation and expansion, and opening Tribal buffalo market opportunities.

Forest Service Significantly Expands Co-Stewardship Investments with Tribal Nations

In 2023, the Forest Service signed 120 new co-stewardship agreements, and nearly tripled annual co-stewardship investments with Tribal communities, to \$68 million in Fiscal Year 2023, up from nearly \$20 million in Fiscal Year 2022. These co-stewardship agreements align with Tribal priorities, like improving watersheds and wildlife habitat, managing invasive species, and addressing the conditions that fuel destructive wildfires. They also incorporate Indigenous knowledge like traditional plant management and ethnobotany, cultural interpretation, and traditional land stewardship methodologies and techniques.

These agreements mark important milestones in relationship-building with Tribal governments and are significant advancements in the co-stewardship of the ancestral lands of Tribal Nations. Highlights include:

- **Alaska:** The Forest Service and the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida have implemented a Memoranda of Understanding on co-stewardship of the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area Federal Lands and Resources. This agreement will ensure that the history and cultural connection Tribes have to the glacier and the surrounding lands are represented through cooperative interpretive programs.
- **Minnesota:** The Forest Service and the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (the Bands) entered a Memorandum of Understanding to provide for co-stewardship and protection of the Bands treaty-reserved rights under the 1854 Treaty. This agreement is the first between the Bands and the Forest Service. The Memorandum of Understanding recognizes the Bands as original stewards of lands now encompassing the Superior National

Forest and outlines procedures to ensure that the Forest Service includes Tribal input into agency decision-making.

- **South Dakota:** Despite significant historical challenges in Tribal relationships, the Forest Service is joining with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Oglala Lakota Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, and other Tribes to develop a co-stewardship agreement for the Pactola/He Sapa Visitor Center on the Black Hills National Forest. This Memorandum of Understanding will maximize opportunities for the participating Tribes to have a voice in telling their story, and provide a representation of Indigenous natural resource values, history, and culture to Black Hills National Forest visitors. It will further serve to educate agency staff, local communities, and the visiting public about the living legacy of the participating Nations.

Background: Forest Management Co-Stewardship

The Forest Service is implementing the "[Strengthening Tribal Consultations and Nation-to-Nation Relationships: A USDA Forest Service Action Plan](#)," which elevates the agency's work to increase co-stewardship with Tribes. The action plan guides the agency in fulfilling its general federal trust responsibilities, honoring treaty obligations, and supporting Tribal self-determination principles. It emphasizes the agency's unique responsibility to ensure that decisions relating to federal stewardship of lands, waters, and wildlife examine how to safeguard the treaty rights and spiritual, subsistence and cultural interests of any federally recognized Tribe.

As part of this work, the Forest Service renamed the State & Private Forestry deputy chief area to State, Private, and Tribal Forestry. This symbolic move emphasizes the Forest Service's commitment to elevating treaty obligations and respect for Tribal sovereignty to a paramount position within the agency's culture and mission.

For more information on the co-stewardship agreements with Tribes visit <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/31d169da03704089b28080c7e707bbc0>. For the full text of the USDA report on Joint Secretarial Order 3403, visit <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/co-stewardship-authorities-november-508.pdf>.

USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. Under the leadership of the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America's food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate-smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit www.usda.gov.

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100 Sun Avenue NE,
Suite 130
Albuquerque, NM
87109