

NATURAL RESOURCES

Key Points:

- Today's tribal youth are relying on protection of tribal homelands, natural resources, and subsistence so those resources will be available to them in the future.
- The retention of natural resources is critical to tribal cultures, traditions, lifestyles and economies.

American Indians and Alaska Natives, as first stewards of this land, have nurtured, lived, and thrived off their homelands since time immemorial. Native peoples continue to rely on their natural resources to sustain themselves as key elements of their culture. Through the Constitution, federal laws, and various agreements with tribal nations, the federal government has treaty and trust responsibilities to Indian tribes to protect, manage, and allow access to tribes' natural resources.

Tribes' cultures, traditions, lifestyles, communities, foods, and economies are all dependent upon many natural resources and they are disappearing faster than they can be restored. These impacts are intensified by effects of climate change on tribal lands. American Indians and Alaska Natives are disproportionately impacted by climate change due to the geographical areas in which they reside and their direct connection to their surrounding environments. Native peoples who rely heavily on the cultural and subsistence practices of their ancestors to survive are particularly hard hit. Specifically, the well-established plight of those in Alaska Native villages is probably the most profound manifestation of the climate crisis and requires focused and high priority attention from the federal government.

Climate change poses threats not only to the health and food supply of Native peoples, but also to their traditional ways of life. Climate change is reducing the natural ecosystems and biodiversity on which Native peoples have come to rely. The traditional time to gather plants is changing, and the migration patterns of animals are being altered. Wildland fires on federal lands are significantly increasing in size, intensity, and cost. In California and the Southwest, many tribes are experiencing prolonged drought which is having an effect on their water resources and rights while some villages in Alaska that are located near rivers or streams now find the water at their front door.

The United States' responsibility toward tribes goes beyond simply supporting prior agreements, it must allow for full tribal participation during discussions on the management of Native resources at the federal-level and the tribal management of natural resources in traditional and culturally appropriate methods. Tribes, as proven effective managers of their own resources, must be included in federal programs as well as funding opportunities available to state and local governments.

Climate Change: On November 1, 2013, President Obama announced the creation of the White House Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience and appointed two Native representatives to the group: Karen Diver, Chairwoman of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and Reggie Joule, Mayor of Alaska's Northwest Arctic Borough. The Task Force released its Report and Recommendations to the President in November 2014 with five overarching principles: (1) require consideration of climate-related risks and vulnerabilities as part of all federal policies, practices, investments, and regulatory and other programs; (2) maximize opportunities to take actions that have dual-benefits of increasing community resilience and reducing greenhouse gas emissions; (3) strengthen coordination and partnerships among federal agencies, and across federal, state, local, and tribal jurisdictions and economic sectors; (4) provide actionable data and information on climate change impacts and related tools and assistance to support decision-making; and (5) consult and cooperate with tribes and indigenous communities on all aspects of Federal climate preparedness and resilience efforts, and encourage States and local communities to do the same.

The final Task Force report was supplemented by tribal-specific recommendations offered by Chairwoman Diver and Mayor Joule from the input they received from tribes during their tenure on the Task Force. The goals highlighted the need for tribes to be included as active participants, but explicitly recommended: (1) tribes have more access to federal agencies' data and information related to climate change; (2) removal of barriers that prohibit tribal access to federal programs; (3) direct access to federal funding; and (4) the establishment of a permanent federal government Climate Adaption Task Force.