



TRIBAL PRIORITIES FOR SOLVING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

The Congressional Action Plan for a Clean Energy Economy and a Healthy, Resilient, and Just America.



Photo Credit: Eddie Sherman

SUPPORT TRIBAL AGRICULTURE FOR CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

Agriculture is a major economic sector in Indian Country and constitutes the economic backbone of approximately 200 federally-recognized Tribes, and many more unrecognized Tribes. In 2017, nearly 80,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) produced agricultural crops on 59 million acres (excluding timberland, >6% of U.S. farmland), according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. The AI/AN workforce in agriculture increased by 10% between 2012 and 2017. USDA programs have a large impact on Tribes, due to the high proportion of the Tribal workforce in agriculture and timber, the importance of nutritional assistance to offset food insecurity, and the fact that about 35% of Tribes are located in rural communities.

Agriculture currently contributes about 10% of the total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. Agriculture is a sector that is relatively difficult to decarbonize, compared to electricity which has competitive alternatives available (e.g., solar, wind). Yet, agricultural practices are important for storing carbon as soil organic matter. The 2018 Farm Bill helped to address this opportunity to increase soil carbon storage by providing robust funding for conservation programs and increasing acreage under the Conservation Reserve Program.

Tribal farmers, ranchers, and loggers are essential partners in achieving carbon neutrality. Tribal Nations have been managing their lands since time immemorial. Regenerative agriculture, no till agriculture, and integrated timber and pasture management (“silvopasture”), which are common practices across many Tribal lands, provide valuable climate benefits.

Tribal land managers and scientists contend with several issues that constrain carbon reductions. The piecemeal nature of grants and other resources for Tribal agriculture impairs long-term planning and reduces efficiencies. The legal and regulatory tools for the management of agricultural land leases on Tribal lands are weak and do not allow Tribes to promote desired management practices, such as conservation stewardship. Also, the administrative and technical workforce of federal agricultural agencies is insufficient, and generally lacks adequate training in Tribal relations to work effectively with Tribes. Tribal land managers, particularly those early in their careers, also confront barriers of access to credit and land.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[ATNI Tribal Review of the Congressional Action Plan](#)

Tribal farmers, ranchers, and timber producers are essential partners in achieving carbon neutrality, as they build upon millennia of land stewardship. Tribal agriculturalists need financial, technical, and educational resources. Congress should expand the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) support for Tribes through resource-delivery programs, coordinating with Tribal Nations on climate stewardship programs, and expanding relevant regulatory and legal tools.

TRIBAL PRIORITIES THAT CONGRESS SHOULD CONSIDER:

>> **Expand federal support for programs of the USDA and related agencies that enable Tribal farmers, ranchers, and timber producers to implement [climate stewardship practices](#)**, meaning practices that significantly reduce agricultural greenhouse gas emissions or promote carbon storage:

- Provide **lending, credit, and land valuation incentives** to improve soil health and carbon storage. Incentivize climate stewardship practices on Tribal leased land.
- Expand Tribal **technical assistance** from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Services Administration, and USDA Service Centers
- Expand **financial support for Tribal conservation districts** and Tribal entities like the Intertribal Agricultural and Timber Councils. Also, encourage federal agency **partnerships** with Tribal conservation districts.
- **Reengage international leadership by rejoining the Paris of** Indigenous people at the southern border.

>> Expand Tribal **regulatory and legal tools** for oversight of **land leases** to promote conservation practices.

>> Invest in **rural broadband to enable precision agriculture** and reduce carbon emissions.

>> Support federal programs that develop **climate-adapted crop varieties, seeds, and animal breeds**.

>> Fund **scholarships and other programs that enable early-career and socially-disadvantaged Tribal farmers and timber producers**, such as those of the Indian Agriculture Management Act of 1993.

>> **Direct federal agencies to coordinate with Tribal Nations to ensure receipt of full financial and technical assistance** to implement climate stewardship practices.

- **Reduce administrative requirements and increase the flexibility of programs** such as the Rural Development Loan and the Value Added Producer Grant.

>> **Support climate stewardship practices, programs, and policies to create a fair and equitable food system.** A recommended model is the Wisconsin Tribal Conservation Advisory Council, which provides an organizational structure for feedback to state and federal policies.

>> Direct federal agencies to **expand eligibility for loan programs to include subsistence producers**. In general, subsistence producers are currently excluded from federal loan programs, yet provide essential nutritional and cultural benefits to their communities.