



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: Danny Manning

PROMOTE THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND HEALTH OF TRIBES WHILE UPHOLDING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY

Climate change policy and action must accomplish more than decarbonization. Addressing climate change must tackle the legacy of non-investment in AI/ANs and other environmental justice communities. An environmental justice community is a community with significant representation of communities of color, low-income communities, or Tribal Nation/ Indigenous communities, that experiences, or is at risk of experiencing higher or more adverse human health or environmental effects. Congressional authorizations must enable full participation by Tribes in decarbonization and meaningfully transform lives and opportunities through a turn-around in long-standing non-investment.

Tribes highlight the importance of youth leadership and empowerment. Tribal colleges and universities are essential educational and research institutions for advancing knowledge and training on climate change. Tribal higher education is often central in supporting Tribes' autonomous determination of climate change response policy, strategy, and action.

For climate change policy to be just and equitable, there should be alignment with the core principles of international human rights. The [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) lays out fundamental rights, including the right to [Free, Prior, and Informed Consent](#), and the right to exercise self-determination over their own development. These should be foundational principles of U.S. climate change policies, laws, and programs. State-recognized and unrecognized Tribes also often invoke the U.N. Declaration.

AI/ANs contend with a high rate of poor health outcomes. The health impacts of climate change are particularly pronounced for Tribes because of social-economic ramifications. Compounding factors are the legacies of institutional discrimination and historical trauma, such as forced relocations and structural inequality, causing major disruptions to the social and cultural organization of communities. These experiences contribute to the higher prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and obesity associated with sedentary lifestyles, poverty, and marginalization. Particularly alarming is the rising number of Indigenous youth developing chronic diseases due in part to historical events, disrupted connection to the land, and decreased access to clean water.

Mental health effects are a major concern. Climate change imposes additional mental health challenges on peoples and cultures with historical connections to place and environment, including the medically-recognized distress caused by negative environmental change in one's home environment (also known as [solastalgia](#)). Outcomes include maladaptive behaviors like enhanced drug and alcohol usage, and suicidal ideation, as well as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Achieving climate change policy that is equitable and just requires addressing the inequalities in exposure to environmental hazards and access to decarbonization solutions faced by American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). Also, Congress must recognize that public health involves mental, behavioral, and physical dimensions, and that for AI/ANs, these dimensions often are rooted in cultural, social-economic, spiritual, and historical connections to homelands. Federal policymakers must engage with Tribes in accordance with the principle of the Government-to-Government relationship in developing climate change policy, and direct federal agencies to adhere to Tribal sovereignty in implementing policies.

TRIBAL PRIORITIES THAT CONGRESS SHOULD CONSIDER:

>> Environmental Justice

- ***Uphold the principle of the Government-to-Government relationship*** in developing federal climate policy and in authorizations for federal agencies to implement policy.
- ***Direct federal agencies to adhere to the principle of Tribal sovereignty*** in administering climate programs and implementing actions.
- ***Include federally recognized, AI/ANs, and unrecognized Tribes in policy considerations.***
- Align climate policies with the *U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- ***Support Tribal colleges and universities*** with financial and technical resources.

>> Public Health

- ***Expand resources specifically for mental and behavioral health***, which are a particularly large concern for AI/ANs due to climate disruptions to cultural and historical ties to place.
- Increase telemedicine options and address broadband infrastructure needs. This development would accelerate Tribal access to healthcare. Likewise, support funding for increased broadband access across Indian Country.
- ***Supplement funding for the National Institutes of Health to support research with Tribes that incorporates Indigenous Knowledges*** into health treatments and interventions (<https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-17-496.html>).
- ***Uphold Executive Order 13592, Improving American Indian and Alaska Native Educational Opportunities and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities.*** Re-establish the Interagency Working Group on American Indian / Alaska Native Education and Tribal Colleges and Universities.



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Climate alterations impose wide-ranging ramifications on Tribal health. One concern is impaired access to traditional foods and medicines. A related concern is erosion of cultural integrity, the effects of which can affect the health of individuals and community cohesion.

A cross-cutting issue with public health is broadband internet access. Telemedicine is an important approach to meet the grave shortage in healthcare workforce in Indian Country. Yet, operational telemedicine relies on broadband access. In 2018, only 69.3% of rural areas and 64.6% of Tribal areas had broadband access ([Rural Health Information Hub, 2019](#)).

TRIBAL PRIORITIES THAT CONGRESS SHOULD CONSIDER (Cont'd.):

>> Public Health (cont'd.)

- Regarding the proposal to standardize a national public health database, ensure that Tribal governments have access to and control over such data. Rigorously secured confidentiality agreements between Tribally run health centers and federal and state agencies may be a useful tool.
- Specify outreach with youth and elders in climate health programs. Ensure outreach with elders during climate-related disasters. Engage youth, who will disproportionately bear climate impacts.
- Direct the Center for Disease Control to recognize racism as a public health crisis, consistent with legislation (H.R. bill 2020, Anti-Racism in Public 5 Health Act of 2020) and research. Indigenous Peoples face institutional racism through differential access to medical care, treatment while under medical care, and a disproportionately high level of preventable deaths caused by exposure to superfund sites, pollution, and other harmful environmental conditions.

CONTACT:

Don Sampson (Umatilla)
Director, Climate Change Program
Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians (ATNI)
Email: dp@seventhgenerationllc.com

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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