



# USET

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Dear Agency Representatives,

On behalf of the United South and Eastern Tribes Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF), we submit these comments in response to joint inter-agency Tribal consultations held on April 6, and 7, 2021. These joint inter-agency consultations were announced via Dear Tribal Leader Letter (DTLL) on March 8, 2021 by representatives from the U.S. Department of the Treasury, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the Social Security Administration, and the U.S. Small Business Administration (Joint Agency or Joint Agencies). The Joint Agency DTLL stated that they are reviewing current Tribal consultation policies and plans for implementation to follow the directives of Executive Order 13175, "Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments" (E.O. 13175). As with other federal departments in the Executive branch, the Joint Agencies have initiated these activities in response to President Biden's January 26, 2021, "Presidential Memorandum on Tribal consultation and Strengthening Nation-to-Nation Relationships." President Biden's memorandum emphasized the Administration's commitment to respect Tribal Nation sovereignty and self-governance, while acknowledging that honoring the federal government's trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations is vital due to current crises related to health, the economy, social justice, and climate change.

USET Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF) is a non-profit, inter-tribal organization advocating on behalf of thirty-three (33) federally recognized Tribal Nations from the Northeastern Woodlands to the Everglades and across the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>1</sup> USET SPF is dedicated to promoting, protecting, and

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<sup>1</sup> USET SPF member Tribal Nations include: Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (TX), Aroostook Band of Micmac Indians (ME), Catawba Indian Nation (SC), Cayuga Nation (NY), Chickahominy Indian Tribe (VA), Chickahominy Indian Tribe—Eastern Division (VA), Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana (LA), Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana (LA), Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (NC), Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians (ME), Jena Band of Choctaw Indians (LA), Mashantucket Pequot Indian Tribe (CT), Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe (MA), Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida (FL), Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MS), Mohegan Tribe

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advancing the inherent sovereign rights and authorities of Tribal Nations and in assisting its membership in dealing effectively with public policy issues.

USET SPF welcomes the opportunity to provide recommendations on how the Joint Agencies can improve their consultation and coordination efforts with Tribal Nations. In an environment like the one created by the Presidential Memorandum, where Tribal Nations are receiving more requests for consultation than many can reasonably accommodate, we appreciate the convenience of a combined consultation. However, we caution against an overreliance on this model on issues where there may not be shared or common interest and note that it likely does not have much broader application beyond this space. We would further argue that this only serves to underscore the need to standardize the consultation process across the federal government and discuss this in greater detail below.

We see the value in the spirit of the January 26<sup>th</sup> Executive Memorandum, which is to recommit and refocus federal agencies to engaging in meaningful Tribal consultation. However, these actions alone are not sufficient to address systemic failures in the various consultation processes across the federal government. Broadly, the U.S. must work to reform the Tribal consultation process—to “build back better,” in a way that truly modernizes our relationship with the federal government. Tribal Nations continue to experience inconsistencies in consultation policies, the violation of consultation policies, and mere notification of federal action as opposed to a solicitation of input. Letters are not consultation. Teleconferences are not consultation. Providing the opportunity for Tribal Nations to offer guidance and then failing to honor that guidance is not consultation.

While each executive department and its agencies must reevaluate its protocols and procedures for Tribal consultation, communication, and engagement, there must be a broader reconciliation across the federal government to provide certainty, consistency, and accountability in this process. The federal government must work to standardize and provide a uniform foundation to its Tribal consultation methods to provide certainty to Tribal Nations and federal officials alike. It is time for a Tribal Nation-defined consultation model, with dual consent as the basis for strong and respectful diplomatic relations between two equally sovereign nations. In the short term, we must move beyond the requirement for Tribal consultation via Executive Order to a strengthened model achieved via statute.

In the long term, we must return to the achievement of Tribal Nation consent for federal action as a recognition of sovereign equality and as set out by the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Instead of sending comments to each individual agency that participated in this consultation regarding updates to their Tribal consultation policies and work plans—as detailed in the March 8, 2021 DTLL—we have decided to offer comments that are relevant to each federal agency. Our recommendations focus on general principles of how federal departments and agencies must improve their coordination and consultation efforts, as well as specific issues Tribal Nations have encountered regarding actions and activities conducted by the Joint Agencies participating in these consultations.

### **Evolve Consultation to Consent**

The U.S. must move beyond a “check the box” method of consultation and instead work to formalize diplomatic relations with and seek the consent of Tribal Nations individually. This directive is reflected in

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of Indians of Connecticut (CT), Monacan Indian Nation (VA), Nansemond Indian Nation (VA), Narragansett Indian Tribe (RI), Oneida Indian Nation (NY), Pamunkey Indian Tribe (VA), Passamaquoddy Tribe at Indian Township (ME), Passamaquoddy Tribe at Pleasant Point (ME), Penobscot Indian Nation (ME), Poarch Band of Creek Indians (AL), Rappahannock Tribe (VA), Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe (NY), Seminole Tribe of Florida (FL), Seneca Nation of Indians (NY), Shinnecock Indian Nation (NY), Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana (LA), Upper Mattaponi Indian Tribe (VA) and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) (MA).

Article 19 of the U.S.-endorsed United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states that nations, “shall consult and cooperate in good faith”, with the governmental institutions of our Tribal Nations, “in order to obtain [our] free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect [us].” Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual and teleconference consultations have had to take the place of in-person, face-to-face, consultations. While this is not a preferred method of consultation, it does offer the federal government another opportunity to engage, communicate, and consult at a Leader-to-Leader level. These methods of consultation provide the federal government with the opportunity to engage and communicate directly with every Tribal Nation.

### **Standardize and Codify Consultation Requirements**

For far too long, Tribal Nations have experienced inconsistencies in consultation policies, the violation of consultation policies, and mere notification of federal action as opposed to a solicitation of input. Letters are not consultation. Teleconferences are not consultation. Providing the opportunity for Tribal Nations to offer guidance and then failing to honor that guidance is not consultation. Accountability is required to ensure Tribal consultation is meaningful and results in corresponding federal efforts to honor Tribal input and mitigate any concerns. All federal agencies, including independent federal agencies and the Office of Management and Budget, must be statutorily required to adhere to consultation policies with additional oversight from the White House and Congress. USET SPF strongly supports the codification of consultation requirements for all federal agencies and departments, including a right of action to seek judicial review of consultation when the federal government has failed to engage, communicate, and consult appropriately. We further urge the Biden-Harris Administration to use its authority, in consultation with Tribal Nations, to create and implement a standard consultation process for use by all agencies.

### **Tribal Consultation Should Occur on a Nation-to-Nation, Leader-to-Leader Basis**

Although consultation can pertain to very specific programmatic issues requiring technical and subject matter expertise, true consultation should occur at a Leader-to-Leader level. Duly elected or appointed Tribal Leaders must be afforded the respect and opportunity to directly voice Tribal Nation concerns to those federal officials with actual decision-making authority. We must further have the opportunity to include and confer with our respective expert staff during every consultation, just as federal officials do. In addition, while the trust relationship is between Tribal Nations (and our leadership) and the federal government (and its leadership) it is important to recognize the role played by our designees and Tribally-led organizations. Though organizations like USET SPF are not Tribal Nations, we serve at the direction and with the support of our member Tribal Nations. Any statements we make during the consultation process represent the collective views of our Tribal Nation membership. Although we fully support prioritizing the comments of Tribal leaders, we ask that you acknowledge comments from Tribal organizations, as well.

Finally, because the U.S. is engaged in a diplomatic relationship with each federally recognized Tribal Nation, greater effort must be made to consult with Tribal Nations on an individual basis. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual and teleconference consultations have had to take the place of in-person, face-to-face, consultations. While this is not a preferred method of consultation, it does offer the federal government another opportunity to engage, communicate, and consult at a Leader-to-Leader level. These methods of consultation provide the federal government with the opportunity to engage and communicate directly with every Tribal Nation.

### **No Delegation of Federal Consultation Obligations**

The trust relationship exists between the federal government and Tribal Nations exclusively. To this point, the federal government must not delegate its consultation obligation to third party entities, which include non-profit organizations, industries/corporations, hired consultants and contractors, non-Tribal

archaeologists and anthropologists, and other units of government. When other entities are party to or involved in federal actions, the federal government must exercise appropriate oversight in ensuring Tribal interests are not adversely impacted. Tribal Nations, and not any other entity, are the final arbiters of whether a federal action impacts our governments, homelands, cultures, public health, or sacred sites.

### **Consultation Should be Early and Ongoing, with Advance Notice and Sufficient Response Timelines**

One of the guiding principles of E.O. 13175 is to establish regular, meaningful consultation and collaboration with Tribal Nations in developing and implementing federal policies. However, this principle has been exercised using methods that have not always taken into consideration the direct and in-direct implications for Tribal Nations. Under the current consultation framework, federal departments and agencies often unilaterally conduct their own internal review of proposed policies and actions, which frequently results in a finding of no impact. This fails to recognize and adhere to the federal government's fiduciary trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations. Rather, consultation and collaboration must recognize Tribal Nations as equal sovereigns. Tribal Nations must always be engaged at the earliest stages of federal decision-making process. In addition, our authority to initiate consultation in response to federal action (or proposed federal action) must be recognized and honored.

### **Deference to Tribal Nations**

E.O. 13175, Section 3 lays out a set of policymaking criteria that have been implemented unevenly over the last two decades. In particular, this includes directives to extend "maximum administrative discretion" to Tribal Nations by encouraging Tribal Nations to develop our own policies and standards to achieve objectives as well as consult with us on the necessity of any federal standards. USET SPF urges the Joint Agencies and the Biden Administration to consider how this section can be better operationalized and consistently applied throughout the federal government. In addition, the Indian Canons of Construction should always be applied during Tribal consultation, the policymaking process, and beyond. That is, any ambiguities in law or policy should be interpreted in favor of Tribal Nations.

### **Flexibility for Tribal Waivers**

Similarly, E.O. 13175, Section 6 encourages the federal government to facilitate and streamline Tribal applications for waivers of statutory and regulatory requirements. With some notable exceptions, this section does not appear to be actively implemented across the federal government. The Joint Agencies and the Biden Administration should also revisit this section and examine what further Executive action is necessary to ensure its widespread operationalization.

### **Transparency in Decision-making**

All too often following Tribal consultation, the federal government renders a decision without further explanation as to how that decision was reached. This is particularly true in the case of "check-the-box" consultation, where Tribal Nations provide input and that guidance is ignored completely. Not only does this run counter to the federal government's consultation obligations, it undermines our Nation-to-Nation relationship. In recognition of and out of respect for our governmental status, as well as in the spirit of transparency, each federal agency should be required to publish a summary of all comments received, how that guidance influenced the agency's decision, and why the decision was reached.

### **Educate Joint Agency Federal Employees on Tribal Sovereignty and U.S.-Tribal Nation Relations**

It is critically important that all employees of federal departments and agencies receive comprehensive training on working with and communicating effectively with Tribal Nations. Federal actions impact Tribal Nations and our citizens. Every right-of-way permit, application for land into trust, and environmental and cultural review document are reviewed by federal employees. However, many of the same federal

employees engaging in decision-making that impacts our interests do not fully understand the history of U.S.-Tribal Nation relations and the federal trust obligation. This lack of education and understanding regarding the fiduciary trust and treaty obligations contributes, at least in part, to federal failures to properly consult. USET SPF has long recommended mandatory training on U.S.-Tribal relations and the trust obligation for all federal employees. This training should be designed in consultation with Tribal Nations. Additionally, we call upon the Joint Agencies to place a Tribal policy expert, if one does not already exist, within the immediate office of the Secretary, Administrator, or Commissioner to assist in guiding the department or agency's approach to our governmental circumstances and priorities. This expert would advise the Joint Agency department or agency heads on issues pertinent to Tribal nations, as well as act as the Tribal consultation point of contact.

### **Investment in Diplomacy**

The Joint Agencies must fully recognize and uphold our Nation-to-Nation diplomatic relationship. This directive extends to ensuring both the department and Tribal Nations have access to resources that support diplomatic activities. True diplomacy, as evidenced by activities conducted by the U.S. Department of State, would involve U.S. ambassadors appointed to liaise with each federally recognized Tribal Nation on behalf of the federal government, rather than facilitating this relationship through national or regional consultations. While we recognize retooling the consultative relationship to allow for a truly diplomatic relationship involves many steps, funding for these activities is certainly one of them. We encourage the Joint Agencies to consider how they might include diplomacy in future budget requests. This would include funding to build and sustain diplomatic infrastructure, as well as increased funding for Tribal Nation participation in these processes. Joint Agency budgets should reflect a broad commitment to improvements in our Nation-to-Nation relationship, including its own functions.

### **The Joint Agencies Should Not Consult with Non-Governmental Entities**

USET SPF continues to be concerned by Treasury (and now VA's) views on consultation with Alaska Native Corporations (ANCs). In the spirit of partnership and with a goal of facilitating greater education and understanding of Tribal Nations, USET SPF reminds Treasury and the Joint Agencies that for-profit ANCs are not Tribal Nation governments, and therefore, do not enjoy a consultative relationship with the U.S. government—a sacred relationship that is founded in the mutual recognition of governmental status between consulting parties and the trust obligation to Tribal Nations. While we fully support and affirm the governmental status Alaska Native Tribal Nations and villages, we underscore that ANCs are for-profit corporations. While the Joint Agencies may have an interest in seeking the input of ANCs on issues relevant to each agency's roles and responsibilities, to do so through consultation is an affront to our Tribal sovereignty and stands in violation of our Nation-to-Nation relationship with the United States. It is in pursuit of policy that does uphold this sacred relationship that we urge the Joint Agencies to avoid equating Tribal Nations and ANCs. We note that while other federal agencies and departments reserve Tribal consultation for Tribal Nations, several seek the input of non-governmental Tribal entities through a 'confer' process.<sup>2</sup>

### **Treasury and the Social Security Administration Must Increase and Improve Inter-Agency Coordination**

Further inter-agency coordination should be fostered and established between Treasury and the Social Security Administration (SSA). Specifically, further inter-agency coordination should be increased regarding the Tribal General Welfare Exclusion Act of 2014 and the exclusion of general welfare benefits provided by Tribal Nations to our citizens from income under the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. SSA should work with Treasury and Tribal Nations to develop guidance that deems all benefits provided under GWE meet SSA's "Assistance Based on Need" standards in accordance with the law.

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<sup>2</sup> See the Indian Health Service's policy on conferring with Urban Indian Organizations. Available at <https://www.ihs.gov/ihtm/pc/part-5/p5c26/>.

## **The Department of Veterans Affairs Must Further Consult and Engage with Tribal Nations**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must work to improve its direct engagement with Tribal Nations—particularly as it works to implement new legislation, modernize electronic health records, and renegotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Indian Health Service (IHS). These are current and ongoing issues that could better inform how VA should update its current Tribal consultation policy and work plan. USET SPF continues to assert that discussions on the MOU and ensuring access to care for our veterans must not occur solely between IHS and the VA. For too long, Indian Country has been left out of these discussions to the detriment of the health of our veterans and Tribal sovereignty. As the agencies negotiate and finalize the MOU, IHS and the VA must seek input and participation from Tribal Nations as full partners on an ongoing basis. Broadly, VA should endeavor to increase engagement Tribal Nations and work to implement Tribal guidance, as it proceeds with these and other initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

An essential aspect of the federal trust responsibility and obligations to Tribal Nations is the duty to consult on the development of Federal policies and actions that have Tribal implications. This requirement is borne out of the sacred relationship between the federal government and Tribal Nations, as well as numerous treaties, court cases, laws, and executive actions. It is a recognition of our inherent sovereignty and self-determination. For too long, the United States has failed to fully uphold and implement E.O. 13175 and other consultation directives. This has resulted in irreparable damage to Tribal Nation homelands, sacred sites, and interests, as well as costly litigation against the federal government. Recent events, including the COVID-19 crisis, have underscored the urgent need for radical transformation in the recognition of our governmental status and the delivery of federal obligations to our people.

We can no longer accept the status quo of incremental change that continues to maintain a broken system. The federal government must enact policies that uphold our status as sovereign governments, our right to self-determination and self-governance, and honor the federal trust obligation in full. This includes evolving away from the current broken model of Tribal consultation and into a future in which Tribal Nation consent is sought for federal action. We ask that the Joint Agencies join us in realizing this change and advocate for this change among its partners in the Executive Branch. Should you have any questions or require further information, please contact Ms. Liz Malerba, USET SPF Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs, at [LMalerba@usetinc.org](mailto:LMalerba@usetinc.org) or 615-838-5906.

Sincerely,



Chief Kirk Francis  
President



Kitcki A. Carroll  
Executive Director