



# USET

SOVEREIGNTY PROTECTION FUND

**Washington, DC Office**  
1730 Rhode Island Ave., NW, Suite 406  
Washington, DC 20036

**Nashville, TN Office**  
711 Stewarts Ferry Pike, Suite 100  
Nashville, TN 37214  
P: 615-872-7900 | F: 615-872-7417

*Transmitted Electronically*  
To [reorganization@usda.gov](mailto:reorganization@usda.gov)

November 14, 2025

Brooke Rollins  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Stephen Vaden  
Deputy Secretary  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins and Deputy Secretary Vaden,

On behalf of the United South and Eastern Tribes Sovereignty Protection Fund (USET SPF), we submit these comments to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in response to the "Department of Agriculture Reorganization Plan" under Secretary Memorandum 1078-015 ("SM 1078-015", or "Reorganization Plan"). As directed by SM 1078-015, the USDA seeks to consolidate, unify, and optimize agency functions to achieve improved effectiveness and accountability, enhanced services, reduced bureaucracy, and cost savings. USDA is one of the largest agencies in the federal government and provides numerous resource management, conservation, infrastructure, and commodity services for Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, and Tribal communities in fulfillment of trust and treaty obligations. Any effort to consolidate existing agencies, programs, services, and funding streams must not directly or indirectly impact the delivery and fulfillment of USDA's trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and our people.

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

While USDA held two Tribal consultations on its proposed Reorganization Plan on October 14, and 16, 2025, we note that these were held during the federal government shutdown. Many Tribal Nations were substantially affected by the shutdown, which lead to the shortage or halt of the delivery of federal services and funds to Tribal Nations. Due to these harmful impacts, Tribal Leaders and government offices were preoccupied with addressing budgetary shortfalls due to the lapse of funding for federal programs and were

---

<sup>1</sup> USET SPF member Tribal Nations include: Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (TX), 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), Mi'kmaq Nation (ME), Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MS), Mohegan Tribe 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 Tribe (VA), and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) (MA).

predominantly focused on attending to the needs of our citizens and communities. For these reasons, USET SPF recommends that USDA host additional Tribal consultations to ensure Tribal Nations have ample opportunity to provide critical feedback on USDA's proposed Reorganization Plan. Hosting these consultations is critical to gathering further guidance and input from Tribal Nations regarding several proposals in its Reorganization Plan now that the federal government has reopened. These include clarification of the roles, responsibilities, and functions of its Office of Tribal Relations and USDA agency Tribal Liaison positions, as well as addressing the impacts of service delivery to Tribal Nations as a result of the departure of USDA staff, proposed relocation of personnel to USDA Hub locations, and the potential impacts to Tribal forestry operations.

### **Consolidation of Tribal Relations Functions Under this Reorganization Plan Remains Unclear**

Principle 7 of USDA's Reorganization Plan seeks to reduce duplicative functions across USDA through consolidation efforts. This effort includes, "[consolidating] Tribal relations functions within mission areas and ensur[ing] the Office of Tribal Relations delivers all statutorily required Tribal relations functions." USDA has provided no additional details on how this will be implemented, except that the consolidation of Tribal relations is intended to make its Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) a one-stop shop for all Tribal inquiries and information. It remains unclear as to who has the responsibility to keep OTR apprised of USDA programming on Tribal lands. Due to the lack of clarification on this matter, we recommend that this reorganization effort explicitly direct its offices and agencies and relevant mission areas to consistently keep OTR informed, especially regarding matters and issues requiring Tribal involvement and consultation. Further, we remain concerned about how consolidation of Tribal relations within "mission areas" will impact USDA non-Tribal-specific programs and services that Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens are eligible to apply for and receive. No additional details have been provided about how this consolidation will impact Tribal-serving federal personnel in USDA agencies that review applications and award funds for non-Tribal-specific programs for which we are eligible.

In addition, we remind USDA that Tribal Nations are not merely "stakeholders" of the USDA, but inherently sovereign, political Nations whose diplomatic relationship with the federal government is rooted in and recognized by the U.S. Constitution, treaties, statutes, and Executive Orders, as well as upheld by the federal judiciary. Consultation with Tribal Nations is a formal, government-to-government, diplomatic process that is legally distinct from engaging with feedback from the public, stakeholders, or other constituencies. The federal government's trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens, and its Nation-to-Nation, diplomatic relationships with inherently sovereign Tribal Nation governments, are distinct from other "stakeholder" issues. The legal foundations of our inherent sovereignty, the Nation-to-Nation relationship, and trust and treaty obligations should not be mischaracterized and combined with "stakeholder" outreach, which would risk undermining the very purpose of a dedicated OTR. The OTR furthers the diplomatic relationship by facilitating the USDA's direct engagement with Tribal Nations and our leadership. Moving forward, USDA must uphold its trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations by detailing OTR's functions and responsibilities, including USDA office and agency responsibilities for coordinating with OTR, prior to finalizing its reorganization efforts.

### **Deferred Resignation, Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments Programs Must be Halted for Tribal-Serving Personnel**

Under Principle 1 of the Reorganization Plan, USDA has stated that it will not conduct further large-scale reductions in force (RIF), but that it will continue to fully leverage the Deferred Resignation, Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments programs. Since USDA may experience additional personnel loss through these programs, it must ensure that the delivery of USDA services and funds to Indian Country is not upended by the loss of federal personnel essential to upholding

legally mandated trust and treaty obligations. USDA's implementation of these programs was implemented with no contingency plan in place to hire or train the necessary personnel required to fulfill USDA's trust and treaty obligations to Indian Country. Rather than increasing efficiency and effectiveness to deliver programs, services, and funds to Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, and Tribal communities, USDA's actions are counterproductive to these efforts. Rather, USDA's Reorganization Plan will exacerbate long-standing resource deficiencies due to the federal government's failure to fully fund Tribal programs and services. Further, considering the loss of vital Tribal-serving personnel under the Deferred Resignation, Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments programs, it has become critically important that USDA backfill these positions. USDA must now shift its focus to attract and retain personnel with institutional knowledge of Indian Country and our programs and develop plans to train essential staff necessary to carry out programmatic service delivery to Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, and Tribal communities.

Additionally, under Principle 1 of its Reorganization Plan, USDA has stated that focused and limited RIFs will be implemented only if needed and only after approval by USDA's Deputy Secretary. We remind USDA that the federal government has consistently failed to uphold its trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations, and one way this is evident is in the persistent understaffing and under resourcing of Tribal-serving programs and personnel throughout the federal government. As Tribal Nations continue to contend with these issues, USET SPF strongly opposes indiscriminate RIFs of Tribal-serving personnel at USDA agencies, as this would further exacerbate disparities, have significant negative impacts on Tribal Nations, and impact surrounding communities that benefit from the services and economic opportunity we provide in agriculture, conservation, and natural resource management.

We are also concerned that any RIFs or use of the Deferred Resignation, Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, and Voluntary Separation Incentive Payments programs inevitably results in the loss of critical institutional knowledge. We remain concerned that there appears to be no plan in place or being developed to respond to the diminished capacity at USDA. Knowledgeable, experienced personnel who have an appreciation for the history of Tribal- U.S. relations are required in order for the federal government to deliver upon its trust and treaty obligations to Indian Country. Entire program staff have been eliminated through these workplace initiatives throughout the federal government without a plan for how to continue providing Tribal services, including the processing of vital funds. Haphazardly conducting RIFs or offering voluntary resignation or early retirement and separation incentive payments without a full assessment of how they will affect programmatic and service delivery is not the answer.

USDA personnel who have or will accept voluntary resignation or early retirement and separation incentive payments must immediately be replaced. USET SPF strongly urges USDA to develop short- and long-term plans for its reorganization efforts to ensure that this will not result in further delays for the delivery of services or funds to Tribal Nations, Tribal citizens, and Tribal communities. This must include focusing on the replacement and rehiring of personnel necessary to fulfill these obligations. Moving forward, USDA must prioritize the hiring of personnel to fill vacant positions that result from RIFs, voluntary early retirement, deferred resignation, and separation incentive payments, as well as those vacancies that existed before these actions. USDA must immediately prepare for and pursue a level of regulatory and structural creativity and flexibility that serves the goals and priorities of Tribal Nations to improve existing processes and avoid further complications.

### **Proposed Personnel Relocations to USDA Hubs Could Create Disruptions in Service Delivery for Tribal Nations**

Under Principle 2 of its Reorganization Plan, USDA is proposing to relocate approximately 2,600 personnel from its National Capital Region in Washington, DC to five regional hub locations in an effort to improve service delivery. However, such a large-scale relocation of USDA personnel could create disruptions in service delivery for Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens, especially since we often must navigate complex bureaucratic requirements between USDA and the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Rather than focusing on relocating USDA personnel from Washington, D.C., the USDA should focus on the roles and responsibilities of respective positions and then, in consultation with Tribal Nations, determine the best physical locations for those roles. In some cases, offices, programs, and personnel should remain in Washington, D.C. to minimize disruptions in service delivery to Indian Country—especially if those services require direct coordination with the BIA headquarters in Washington, DC. Further, during the Tribal consultations held on USDA's Reorganization Plan, Tribal Leaders stated that the relocation of personnel to five new hub locations across the country does not meaningfully bring USDA staff and resources closer to us. Rather, in order to achieve service delivery effectiveness and efficiency for Tribal Nations, USDA should focus on the creation of Tribal-specific hubs to directly engage with Tribal Nations in our communities.

In addition, USDA is also proposing to align the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) regions within the five hub locations but fails to provide details on what this realignment would look like. Currently, the majority of NRCS employees are located in local offices to directly serve farmers and ranchers. USDA has indicated that it intends to keep local offices open, but it remains unclear how the reorganization around the five hub locations will maintain the presence and expertise related to operations in Indian Country in a manner that is convenient to Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens. Throughout the proposed realignment, USDA must work closely with Tribal Nations to maintain regional and local NRCS personnel with expertise on Tribal conservation priorities and the nuances related to working on Tribal lands, including engagement with the BIA and Tribal governments.

### **USDA Must Retain Tribal Liaisons in Various Mission Areas**

While USDA's OTR plays a critical role in ensuring that USDA upholds its trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations, many USDA agencies maintain Tribal Liaisons or Tribal-specific staff positions to provide assistance to Tribal Nations and coordinate with OTR. These include, but are not limited to, the NRCS, the Farm Service Agency (FSA), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). These Tribal Liaisons or Tribal-specific staff positions are critical for ensuring USDA programs reach Tribal Nations and Tribal citizens. In addition, these positions provide critical subject matter and programmatic expertise to ensure USDA programs uphold the federal government's trust, treaty, and statutory obligations to us. Therefore, it is critical that USDA has staff in every mission area that understands Tribal sovereignty, the unique requirements around federal and Tribal jurisdictions, as well as BIA oversight of Indian Country and its intersection with USDA programs.

To uphold its trust and treaty obligations to Tribal Nations and support programmatic service delivery and technical assistance, USDA should prioritize the immediate hiring of vacant USDA Tribal Liaison positions within all its agencies. Further, USDA should commit to increasing its annual budget for agency Tribal Liaisons and Tribal-specific staff positions, as well as the OTR, to ensure the Department has the capacity to meet its service delivery obligations to Tribal Nations. In addition to the operations and responsibilities of OTR, agency Tribal Liaison and Tribal-specific staff positions provide critical support for programs and policies relevant to Indian Country and ensures that upholds its Tribal consultation requirements in collaboration with the Department's mission area programs and agencies. These recommendations have

also been supported by the USDA Tribal Advisory Committee's (TAC) [2024 Committee Report](#) and its [2025 Committee Mid-Year Report](#).

### **Concerns with USDA's Reorganization Plan Impacts to Tribal Forestry Operations**

USDA's proposed reorganization should be halted until it works with Tribal Nations to identify USFS and National Forest System (NFS) positions that are critical to protecting treaty-reserved rights to hunt, fish, and gather, the practice of cultural lifeways, and promoting economic development. This includes a wide variety of forest management efforts, such as protecting Tribal resources from wildfires, disease, and invasive species. If USDA cannot fill critical USFS and NFS positions identified by Tribal Nations, USDA should utilize existing authorities to delegate those responsibilities to Tribal Nations, which will streamline federal functions and continue to implement projects in a timely and region-specific manner.

Example authorities that could be leveraged for implementation by USDA include—but are not limited to—the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (P.L. 108-148, 117 Stat. 1887); the Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act (P.L. 118-234, 138 Stat. 2836); the Tribal Forest Protection Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-278, 118 Stat. 868); the Stewardship End Results Contracting Projects (P.L. 108-7; Agricultural Act of 2014 P.L. 113-79); and other cooperative agreements or alternative funding agreements. While these are not an exhaustive list of authorities USDA could utilize to improve service delivery for Tribal Nations, we emphasize that Tribal Nations have long sought expansion of P.L. 93-638 self-governance contracting and compacting across all USDA programs in the Farm Bill reauthorizations. We remind USDA that it must support expansion of P.L. 93-638 contracting and compacting across all USDA programs to support Tribal Nations in directly accessing and managing USDA funds and services to protect our homelands, both within and outside of our jurisdictional boundaries—including for forestry programs. This will support the Administration's goals of streamlining federal functions and ensuring that federal dollars are spent appropriately to address the priorities of our communities.

In addition, during the October 2025 Tribal consultations, Tribal Leaders expressed concerns with eliminating Forest Service Regional Offices. We remind USDA that Regional Foresters have statutory obligations and are essential personnel for forest management operations. Therefore, USDA should maintain regional USFS and NFS positions with specific knowledge and expertise on the market, ecosystem, and community needs of each USFS and NFS region.

Further, USFS and NFS staff should engage in regular government-to-government meetings with Tribal Nations throughout each year. This will increase the effectiveness and timeliness of USFS and NFS outcomes and reduce potential litigation activities that could result in halting forestry management and other operations. USDA—particularly USFS—should co-develop master agreements with Tribal Nations to provide flexible, legal frameworks covering multiple partnership authorities. These agreements would reduce the need to go through a lengthy process to enter into an agreement for each individual action, such as fuels reduction, cultural burning, monitoring, and workforce development.

### **Conclusion**

As the federal government continues to implement the Administration's policy priorities and pursues reorganization efforts, Tribal and Tribal-serving programs, services, and personnel across USDA must be insulated from any negative impacts. These resources are delivered in fulfillment of legal trust and treaty obligations and in furtherance of our unique government-to-government, diplomatic relationship with the United States and must not be impeded or eliminated by USDA's efforts to reorganize and restructure. USDA must also honor its obligations to engage in consistent Tribal consultation on its reorganization efforts and all future activities that have Tribal implications, including those identified as such by Tribal

Nations. While USET SPF supports streamlining, effectiveness, and accountability to increase the provision of USDA service delivery to Indian Country, we urge USDA to uphold its trust and treaty obligations to further consult with Tribal Nations on this Reorganization Plan prior to implementation. Moving forward, USET SPF stands ready to support USDA efforts to remove bureaucratic barriers that hinder Tribal access to USDA programs and services while improving service delivery and efficiencies that support our inherent sovereignty and self-determination. 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Francis", written in a cursive style.

Chief Kirk Francis  
President

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kitcki A. Carroll", written in a cursive style.

Kitcki A. Carroll  
Executive Director