

September 16th, 2022

The Honorable Secretary Deb Haaland
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20240
Email: officeoftheseecretary@ios.doi.gov

The Honorable Secretary Tom Vilsack
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20250
Email: agsec@usda.gov

RE: Co-management is about restoring inherent human rights and relationships to the land through respectful management by the federal government.

Dear Honorable Secretaries Haaland and Vilsack,

Guwehtzee (Greetings)!

Thank you for the Joint Secretarial Order on Co-management, the Cooperative Agreement on Bears Ears, and Co-Stewardship Memo you have created to guide tribal co-management and consultation with Tribes. We appreciate and are aware of the many programs you are developing within the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to chart new pathways forward with Native communities and Indian Nations. What we are most impressed by is the shift in tone and the promises being made to reset and reinvent the meaning of government-to-government relationships with sovereign tribal nations.

We are writing to you today as a group of indigenous organizers, tribal leaders, and staff, as well as elders and youth who are all actively working on co-management concepts alongside tribal nations. We are interested in building these policies from the grassroots council level. We most recently gathered together within Bears Ears National Monument on July 23rd, 2022, to discuss our hopes and desires for the future around sacred spaces while shining a light on what might be possible.

Co-management is a commonly used term without a clear definition. It can mean many things such as decision-making, funding, sharing of management practices and documentation of ecological knowledge. Even after reading each of the recent orders and agreements, it is unclear what co-management will look like, and we worry that in some cases the burdens of management may outweigh the benefits to some Tribes. We would like to offer what we see as most beneficial in this future space for co-management by Tribes.

- **Access & Protection:** Native communities inherently deserve **access** and perpetual rights to ancestral lands, water, and wildlife, especially in places that have not been polluted or degraded in recent centuries. This means securing protection of important places and setting aside land for protection. Agencies should also create welcoming spaces for Indigenous People who need privacy and to have genuine prayer and discourse while reconnecting to ancestral homelands. What Tribes mean by protection must also be defined. To achieve some management goals

agencies need not extract traditional knowledge from elders, they simply need to allow Native People to restore existing relationships to the land. Access is also about free prior informed consent and consultation which requires communications with decision-makers.

- **Land Management Policy Reform:** Tribes need **policy change** to remove barriers to cultural practice, to rekindle indigenous relationships to the Earth, and to recognize the roles we play in activating lands through cultural practice. For example, our spiritual leaders may need to be able to safely kindle a fire during fire season, or we may need agencies to monitor the health of specific plants which have historically been left unmanaged. We must design co-management policies to best serve each Tribe. We need cross-cultural education between agencies and Native communities to achieve improved communications. Much like agency staff might not understand the role of rituals during hunting season, Native wood cutters may not understand the meaning of a “Wilderness Study Area” or a public right of way through a private inholding. Tribes need a voice and role in reviewing and shaping policies throughout the decision-making and to review process on all policies that affect us. Overall, we need new policies that recognize ancestral homelands as holding their own rights, acknowledging traditional sacred practices.
- **Funding:** Some Tribes require and would benefit from **federal, state, and county funding** to restore streams, native plants, and wildlife. Youth “Guardian Programs,” or a “Native Climate Corps” could assist with wildlife monitoring, wild food management and other conservation practices. These actions would strengthen our cultural ties to the land, as we heal, stay connected with elders, and speak our languages. It is not enough for the federal government and sovereign tribal leaders to do this work. Many Tribes lack the funding and capacity to engage their own elders in off-reservation land management and assistance should be provided for them to do so. Alternatively, Native communities might organize internally to bring land-based issues to their own leadership by seeking private funding for grassroots advocacy. Native communities need more meetings with tribal representatives and agency officials, and funding for specific natural resources or location-based task forces. Agencies can and should hire more Native People who already hold expertise across our ancestral homelands. Understanding lands is embodied within our people which can be deployed through employment.

Co-management should be explicitly defined as policies that are designed to primarily benefit Native people and the land itself. The federal government should consider whether it is over-burdening Tribes now, or in future administrations with unfunded mandates. In the past, these shortcomings have sometimes been used against Tribes to assert that the traditional practices of Tribes are ineffective as land management tools. It is the job of federal land managers to serve the needs and fulfill promises made to Tribes, and it is not the job of Tribes to restore ecosystems at a continental scale. Rather than shifting the management burden onto Tribes; in some cases, the federal government will be better equipped and more efficient at managing the land to meet the Tribes’ needs, outside of a “co-management” model. It is challenging to enter the complexity of defining roles, transferring knowledges, and creating shared decision-making processes, especially when the politics of these relationships may change every 4-8 years as political winds shift.

As indigenous leaders focus on adopting concepts of co-management, we believe the goals of Native People will be realized by full integration of tribal co-management strategies, principles, and practices so that equality and justice is achieved. We request including the “restoration of indigenous

relationships to the land” into the concept of co-management. We request federal officials expand the definition of co-management beyond Tribal management of federal lands, co-equal decision-making, and the collecting of indigenous knowledge for federal agencies to wield¹ This limited definition may inadvertently ignore the essential role of elders and cultural practitioners who often exist outside of the functions of tribal governance. Recognizing the restoration of “indigenous relationships” between the natural world and individual tribal members acknowledges private and spiritual connections to these cultural landscapes. Some Tribes may of course seek larger co-management roles, however in many places Tribes seek to be trusted to restore ancestral lands by rekindling these traditional relationships, cultural practices, and the people to sacred places.

Please consider **naming “restoration of indigenous relationships” between indigenous people and the land, water, fire, air, and wildlife as a “resource” or “object” to be protected by the federal government.** This will acknowledge indigenous presence as beneficial to federal lands and may heal the land, by simply allowing Tribal members to co-exist once again, in these spaces. Oral traditional knowledge transmission within Tribes could still become part of the mission of the federal government, but this should be encouraged indirectly, and not as a step in the federal government becoming the repository of indigenous traditional knowledge. Tribes can lead this by allowing, encouraging, and finding funding for its continuance, rather than requiring knowledge to be shared outside of each Tribe.

Tribes envision language revitalization, food system recovery, youth leadership development, and well-paid jobs in natural resources and land management positions for tribal members, however these changes may be most powerful if led and developed by each Tribe and across each ancestral landscape. In many cases, the federal government might continue to manage public lands so that Tribal members can once again interact freely with our human and non-human relatives in sacred spaces like at Bears Ears National Monument. Co-management is a good start to a dialogue aimed at defining a shared future between the United States land management agencies and Tribes, however we believe much greater gains might be realized if we allow each indigenous community to define what is needed for their own people and for Tribes to co-lead this government-to-government relationship forward.

Finally, we would like to express our collective appreciation for all that this administration and federal staff across the country are doing to elevate the voices of Native People and we respectfully acknowledge the challenges we are collectively facing. We are here to support and assist however we can be of service on this subject of co-management which includes access, protection, policy reform, and funding to Native People. On behalf of all indigenous people of the United States and these homelands we collectively steward, we share these thoughts.

Da'waa'eh (Thank you) on behalf of the Indigenous Co-management Strategy Meeting Attendees who have co-signed this letter below as individuals, and not in their official organizational or tribal capacities,

¹ Bears Ears Presidential Proclamation #9558: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201600875/pdf/DCPD-201600875.pdf>

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