



U.S. Senate Indian Affairs Committee  
Special Committee on the Climate Crisis  
[Community\\_Leaders\\_Feedback@indian.senate.gov](mailto:Community_Leaders_Feedback@indian.senate.gov)

September 13, 2019

Dear Committee Chairs Senators Udall and Schatz, and Committee Members Senators Baldwin, Bennet, Cantwell, Cortez-Masto, Duckworth, Heinrich, Markey, Merkley, Smith, Tester, and Whitehouse,

This document presents a series of recommendations to address the urgent threat of climate change for consideration by the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and the Special Committee on the Climate Crisis. The recommendations have been developed by the [Rising Voices](#): Climate Resilience through Indigenous and Earth Sciences program, which facilitates intercultural collaboration for understanding and adapting to extreme weather and climate events, variability, and change. The recommendations are distilled from nearly a decade of meetings, workshops, projects, and discussions with over 550 Indigenous, tribal, and community leaders, atmospheric, social, biological, and ecological scientists, students, educators, and other experts from across the United States and around the world.

Adapting in one's current place and homelands is the priority; however, there are already communities on the frontlines of climate change experiencing climate-driven displacement and threatened with cultural erasure. Therefore, we strongly recommend the following recommendations focused around community resettlement/site expansion as near-term actions. These recommendations do not replace actions to be taken to support communities to continue to adapt and thrive in their current locations, where they have dwelled for generations and centuries. What follows serves as a starting pathway for action for communities who decide that their current locations are no longer inhabitable. We also include recommendations on science actions to support related priorities.

- ***Human Right to Safe, Viable Communities:*** In the spirit of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, support the “**Human Right to Safe, Viable Communities.**” Communities should be able to determine how best to adapt to a changing climate. This entails supporting communities on their adaptation priorities, including when communities are working to adapt in place. If the community themselves decide that their place is no longer habitable due to climate and other stressors, then this includes supporting the communities’ priorities in creating a safe, viable community through a community-led resettlement or site expansion process.
- **Community-led decision-making:** Include Indigenous peoples in every step of the disaster-prevention and community resettlement/site expansion process, including Tribes without federal recognition. This calls for an increase in the federal government’s institutional flexibility to work with Tribal government’s timescales and systems, and highlights the importance of resettlement on community terms, and upholding cultural identity, sovereignty, and community rights. The loss of land does not mean the loss of

rights. This is especially critical in the challenges of administrative law that is often inflexible when it comes to Tribes and Indigenous Peoples.

- **Convene a Climate Migration Task Force.** A Federal Task Force on Climate Migration would address the identified need to establish a legal mechanism, institutional framework, and financial support to directly support marginalized communities (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who are facing displacement due to climate change impacts and who desire to migrate safely and with dignity. The Task Force will guide government-to-government relationships and frame relocation based on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and for *communities*, not just individuals. The Task Force should include representation from Tribal leaders and other communities pursuing community resettlement. The Task Force is a starting point, and will require support and commitment by the involved agencies and Executive and Legislative branches to implement the recommendations that emerge.
- **Appropriate, inclusive language:** Use language guided by Tribal leaders and community members who have been working for decades on site expansion and community resettlement. To call a process inclusive without understanding the ramifications of language used, such as “managed retreat”, carries deep risks of quietly continuing histories of colonization.
- **Disaster assistance: Reduce the minimum amount of damages required to file for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds.** This includes support for smaller, less-resourced, and rural Tribal communities.
- **Collaborative Research: Have Indigenous communities most impacted by a changing climate be co-investigators in climate change research.** This includes helping to set a U.S. research agenda that addresses the unique priorities, contexts, and experiences of Indigenous communities and invites community members’ participation as partners. Increase collaboration within and between Indigenous Peoples, government agencies (local, state, and federal), and Earth scientists, which is key to successful adaptation and mitigation. Resources need to be allocated and managed by Indigenous community leaders to enable that participation, including resources to support training, workforce development, data gathering and management, the purchase of appropriate equipment, and the incorporation of research results into community planning.
- **Science: Create a Native Science Foundation to serve as a network of networks or broad infrastructure to facilitate climate change research practices.** This Foundation could build knowledge and capacity within Tribes, among Tribes, and between Indigenous and other collaborators within and across multiple sectors. As a shared resource for Tribal communities it would be a way of sharing knowledge and building capacities towards adaptation and resilience. It could support a Tribal peer review process for initiating research with Tribes and Tribal entities that could be adopted widely by any Tribe seeking to institute a review process. It could also lead the call for scientific documents to be published in Indigenous languages.
- **Data and monitoring: Create holistic science monitoring systems, metrics, and models that include financial, ecological, spiritual, and cultural components.** This will help communicate Indigenous and Traditional Ecological Knowledges to non-Indigenous scientists and communities, and support developing more robust responses to climate

change based on how people actually live and what matters in their lives. There is also a need to develop more localized data on climate stressors such as sea level rise.

- **Indigenous Wisdom and Knowledges: Support inclusion of Indigenous wisdom, knowledges, perspectives, and insights in federally-appointed and/or agency-led assemblies concerned with natural resources, environmental management, and policy.** The free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of Indigenous peoples should be respected and applied when these assemblies are formed and engagement with Indigenous peoples is included as government-to-government consultation, as per the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Through the consultation process, include dialogue about the risks that such exchanges carry for Indigenous Peoples and knowledge holders, as there are currently very limited protections for the risks of appropriation and mis-use of Traditional Knowledges that Indigenous Peoples share with federal partners. Support inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, insights, knowledges, and wisdom through a process that respects and upholds Tribes and Indigenous Peoples' collective rights. Recognize, value, and support the wealth of knowledge, wisdom, and lived experience of Indigenous relationships with the environment, which is important for filling in lack of data and for developing adaptation and sustainable strategies. Long-term experiential science and information developed over generations of Indigenous Peoples needs to be recognized and respected as true science. Important Indigenous led literatures and guidelines documents already exist and can be used for advising the Senate Committees on this recommendation.
- **Collective rights: Uphold Tribes and Indigenous Peoples' collective rights with a unique place at the decision-making table,** guaranteed by the US Constitution, numerous treaties, statutorily, by Presidential executive order, and by promulgated policy (see, for example, [DOI's Policy on Consultation with Indian Tribes](#) and a [legal and policy perspective on consulting with Tribes](#)). Tribes and Indigenous Peoples are collective rights-holders, including but not limited to rights to self-determination, subsistence, and land (see the [United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)). Tribal rights and historical and current ties to ancestral homelands, sovereignty, and commitments to future generations and cultural continuity are to be upheld and respected particularly in but not exclusive to government-to-government negotiations. This requires, at a minimum, through any and all of the recommendations above, upholding the meaningful consultation standard respecting Indigenous Peoples as rights holders, and protecting the rights of all Indigenous Peoples regardless of federal recognition and whether or not directly qualified for federal funds.

The *Rising Voices* community stands ready to assist you to support implementing the above recommendations, as we represent a broad base of experience and expertise.

Respectfully,



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