

**Testimony of John Johnson, Sr., President
Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians Before the
House Appropriations Subcommittee
on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
Regarding FY 2025 & FY 2026 BIA, BIE, IHS & EPA Accounts
February 25, 2025**

I am John Johnson, Sr., President of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. Members of our Tribal Council join me today. We represent over 9,000 Tribal members and descendants, the majority of whom live on our 144 square mile reservation in northern Wisconsin. We have traveled from Waswaagoning and thank you for giving us the opportunity to testify concerning the Tribe's FY 2026 funding needs primarily in the BIA, IHS, and EPA accounts.

Our ancestors and each succeeding generation of Lac du Flambeau Tribal members have honored our treaty obligations with the United States. Our veterans have served this nation's armed forces and fought, bled, and died for the United States in all its wars in numbers disproportionate to our percentage of the population. The Federal programs and services provided to the Tribal nations – included in this Subcommittee's appropriation bill – represent a portion of the United States' responsibility to Tribal veterans, their families and their Tribes and honor the treaties, statutes, Executive Orders, court decisions, and the government-to-government relationship between the Federal Government and Indian Nations such as Lac du Flambeau.

Federal appropriations often spell the difference between the success or failure of Tribal programs which, in turn, directly influences the health and safety of our Tribal members and non-members our community. Our Tribe does not live in a vacuum. Our services benefit surrounding non-Tribal communities. The economic hardships created by proposed Federal budget cuts will be felt on our reservation and in surrounding townships, municipalities and county services.

Cutting funding to vital Tribal programs will not reduce "bureaucratic" waste and abuse. It will jeopardize program services to our members and result in the layoff of hundreds of dedicated Tribal and non-Tribal employees who work in mostly rural communities. Their layoffs will put their families in economic crisis. The Tribe is the largest employer in several Wisconsin counties that border our reservation. Significant budget cuts will trigger a reduction in essential government services or outright elimination of services in our community and the surrounding non-tribal communities. Crime, unemployment, and rates of substance use will increase. We must learn from past mistakes when the Federal government cuts service funding indiscriminately.

In July 2024, the House passed a \$38.4 billion FY 2025 appropriation measure for the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies and provided key increases that Tribes requested in last year's appropriations hearing. That spending measure:

- ✓ Appropriated \$2.81 billion for BIA-funded programs – an increase of \$356 million (+14.5%) above the FY 2024 enacted level, including \$746 million for Public Safety and Justice Programs, a 34% increase above the FY 2024 level;
- ✓ Appropriated \$1.47 billion for BIE-funded programs – an increase of 7.5% above the FY 2024

enacted level, including \$271 million for Education Construction, a 15% increase above the FY 2024 level;

- ✓ Appropriated \$8.56 billion to IHS-funded programs – an increase of \$1.6 billion (+23%) above the FY 2024 level, and provides nearly \$6 billion in FY 2026 advance appropriations;
- ✓ Appropriated \$368 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative and \$72 million for the Tribal General Assistance Program important to our Tribe.

These significant gains are now all at risk. So too are the status of thousands of probationary BIA, BIE, and IHS personnel who received termination notices. Their mission is to serve the United States by assisting to empower Tribes. If Congress does not protect the Federal appropriations - and the Federal personnel covered within the BIA, BIE, IHS and other agency accounts for FY 2025 and FY 2026 - Tribes, like Lac du Flambeau, will suffer.

We have traveled from our reservation homeland to testify today to request that you honor the House-passed FY 2025 appropriation of July 24, 2024 that made significant increases to BIA- and IHS-funded programs critical to the needs of Tribal communities, and held Tribal programs constant in EPA accounts that otherwise saw a 20% reduction.

On February 6, 2025, under the Trump Administration, the Acting General Counsel of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Sean R. Keveney, confirmed to DHHS Chief of Staff, Heather Flick, that President Trump’s Executive Order titled “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing” does not apply to IHS Programs that service American Indians and Alaska Natives. Instead, these programs and the crucial funding appropriated by the United States provide much needed services that were promised by past administrations to our forefathers for the health and prosperity of all Tribal citizens.

Similarly, on January 30, 2025, the Acting Secretary of the Interior, Walter Cruickshank, issued Order No. 3416 to clarify that President Trump’s Order to end DEI Programs does not eliminate, rescind, impair, or otherwise affect activities that implement legal requirements independent of the rescinded equity-related EOs, including the statutory authorities, treaty, and/or trust obligations of the Interior Department and its Bureaus/Offices to Tribal nations. This distinction is consistent with the understanding our Tribal treaty makers had when the United States Senate ratified our treaties and when Congress appropriated the funding in the subsequent years following the ratification of these treaties. It is our combined history of good faith and good governance between the United States and La du Flambeau that we work together to address these ongoing issues rather than compound them with untargeted budgets cuts and layoffs.

Yet it would appear that OPM officials pay no heed and have grouped BIA, BIE, and IHS probationary employees, including 800 healthcare providers, as expendable.

Budget cuts to Tribal programs and the gutting of BIA, BIE, and IHS staff who serve Tribes will reverse decades of work by these tribal agencies and the United States to empower Tribal governments, raising the health standards of tribal members, making Tribal communities safer, and increase education outcomes for all tribal members students to compete successfully in 21st Century economy, from Head Start to college. Tribal members are loyal citizens to the United

States and to their states who pay taxes to fund law enforcement, education, and essential human service programs that are vital to rural communities.

Last year, our Tribe testified before this Subcommittee about the triple threat to the health of our community caused by the fentanyl epidemic, the resulting mental health crisis, and human trafficking (MMIP), which combined has strained Tribal governmental services to the brink.

Our reservation boundary does not prevent ills from spilling out to surrounding non-Tribal communities, just as State and county boundaries do not stop drugs and gangs from coming onto our reservation. Just as the United States is appropriating more funds to protect our nation's borders, Tribal nations face similar challenges and will require additional funds to protect our families from drugs, violence and homelessness. Without more funding, local governments – Tribal and non-Tribal – are not equipped to handle the crisis. Further funding cuts will only compound the dilemma for both communities.

I conclude with the following requests:

Promote Tribal language initiatives within BIA and BIE funding – It is well established that teaching Native language in schools and other settings promotes self-esteem and confidence in Tribal youth. Tribal language programs are not DEI initiatives. Native language immersion programs benefit society by helping to educate proud, confident Americans. We urge the Subcommittee to provide resources to continue this important program that ensures another generation of American Indians and Alaska Natives perpetuate Native language in our communities.

Increase FY 2025 and FY 2026 Funding for Johnson O'Malley Program (JOM) and Higher Education – Changes to the JOM Program have expanded eligible LDF Band Tribal students from 770 to more than 1000. JOM funds are critical to support Native students in local schools. Please also support increases in the BIE Higher Education accounts. The Tribe subsidizes BIE Higher Education Scholarships by 50% to provide only partial tuition assistance to 100 Tribal students.

Address Pay Disparities For Tribal Police Officers – Congress must pass and fund the “**Parity for Tribal Law Enforcement Act**” to address pay inequities that often result in high turnover rates for our well-trained Tribal law enforcement officers being recruited by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies who can offer better pay and benefits. So long as this pay equity issue exists, Lac du Flambeau Police Department and services will not be able to recruit and retain trained and experienced law enforcement officers. This is a public safety issue not only for our tribe, but for local and county communities as well.

Ensure that BIA Regional Offices and Agency Offices are Staffed – The Tribe fully supports in-person work by Interior Department personnel in all BIA Regional and Agency offices, including the Midwest Region. Congress, however, must ensure that the Interior Department adequately staffs BIA Regional and Agency offices to meet the work demands required to provide timely and accurate information to Tribal officials relating to all matters falling under the Department's jurisdiction. Too often, the Tribe has found that BIA Regional and Agency personnel do not respond timely, or at all, to our written requests for information. This undermines our

ability to address Tribal member and Tribal government needs for such information. Indiscriminate firing of Federal personnel will undermine agency responsiveness to Tribes.

Increase FY 2025 Funding for BIA Human Services accounts and the Tiwahe Initiative

Program - We appreciate the \$12.6 million increase reflected in H.R. 8998 for the BIA Human Services account, but a 7.6% increase is insufficient to address the shortage of Social Workers and counselors our Tribe requires to track at-risk Indian families and Tribal youth who are removed from their homes due to child neglect or abuse. These resources, together the successful “**Tiwahe Initiative**” pilot program, must be increased to meet the growing demands for social services and trained personnel who assist Tribes keep Native families intact and functional. These programs are proven to work when they are sufficiently staffed and adequate resources are available to provide services and counseling as an alternative to incarceration and family separations which can prove so costly to the psyche of young children and to their parents.

Sustain GLIFWC Funding in Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Accounts

– We strongly support safeguarding and increasing annual appropriations within the Subcommittee’s jurisdiction that finance the work of the **Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC)**. These programs are critical to maintaining the health and safety 11 Ojibwe Tribes and our members by sustaining the lands, waters, fish, wildlife and habitats in ceded territories where our tribes reserved hunting, fishing, and gathering rights in the Treaties of 1836, 1837, 1842, and 1854 with the United States.

Address the lack of Funding for Infrastructure Construction in the Interior Department and IHS Budgets

– There are too few discretionary construction dollars in the BIA and IHS construction accounts to address the unmet needs in Indian country for infrastructure. To ensure community stability, there must be safe drinking water, wastewater systems, schools, housing, roads, law enforcement, emergency services and healthcare. When these systems and services are in place, Tribes are in a better position to grow our economies and retain our most important asset, our people.

We anticipate that we will need to build 1200 new homes over the next decade and upgrade our waste treatment facilities and systems to meet increasing community needs. The funds are simply not available within existing appropriations to finance the costs to plan, design, construct these facilities, related utilities, roads, and other infrastructure to address the growing population.

We remain committed to protecting our communities, just as the United States is committed to protecting our nation. Together, we must demonstrate to Tribal members and their families that our Tribal communities are safe communities for them to live in; there are schools to educate their children, clinics for them, their children, and their elders to receive healthcare, and jobs for them to provide for themselves and their families.

Please fund and defend the House appropriation levels for the BIA, BIE, IHS accounts and related programs for FY 2025 and ensure that FY 2026 funding is similarly protected – including the Federal personnel who serve Tribes and oversee Tribal contracts and agreements – to meet Tribal needs and the Federal government’s continuing trust obligations to our members and all Tribal nations. **Miigwech.**