

Testimony of William H. Kirkland, III
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U.S. Department of the Interior
Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
On the President's Fiscal Year 2027 Budget Request

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Chairman Murkowski, Vice Chairman Schatz, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the President's Fiscal Year 2027 Budget request for Indian Affairs. I appreciate the Committee's continued leadership and longstanding commitment to upholding the Federal government's trust and treaty responsibilities to Tribal Nations, American Indians, and Alaska Natives.

Under President Trump's leadership, Interior is upholding its trust responsibilities and supporting Indian Country by allocating funds for energy development, public safety, and infrastructure. The budget will increase efficiency as the Department cuts red tape and speeds up approval processes for projects that improve the health and welfare of Indian Country.

As the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, I oversee the numerous programs within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA) along with other programs within the immediate Office of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs).

The primary mission of Indian Affairs is to honor the country's trust, treaty, and other responsibilities to American Indians and Alaska Natives and improve the quality of life in Indian Country. These objectives are achieved by recognizing the wide dissimilarity of Indian Tribes and Alaska Native villages as distinct cultural and governmental entities, strengthening government-to-government relationships, and advancing self-governance and self-determination.

The 2027 budget request for Indian Affairs is \$2.8B, which includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), and the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration (BTFA). The FY 2027 budget request for BIA is \$1.8 billion. This includes \$1.3 billion for the Operation of the Indian Programs account. The FY 2027 budget submission for the BIE is \$929.8 million. In addition to supporting 183 elementary and secondary schools, BIE operates two postsecondary institutions located in two States. The FY2027 request also includes \$90.1 million to support the execution of Federal Trust Responsibilities to Native American Tribes, individuals Indians, and Alaska Natives. BTFA manages more than \$8.8 billion in funds held in trust for federally recognized Tribes, individual Indians, and Alaska Native beneficiaries in more than 4,300 Tribal accounts and more than 414,000 Individual Indian Monies accounts.

Promoting Tribal Self-Determination and Governance

The Department is committed to upholding Tribal sovereignty. The BIA Tribal Government activity supports resources for Tribes and Alaska Native entities to strengthen and sustain Tribal government systems and support Tribal self-governance through the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) contracting and self-governance compacting process.

The budget requests funding for Tribal Priority Allocations (TPAs) programs that give Tribes the opportunity to further Indian self-determination by establishing their own priorities and reallocating Federal funds among programs in this budget category. The 2027 budget proposes TPA funding of \$459.9 million.

The President's Budget maintains the Administration's support for the principles of Tribal self-determination and strengthening Tribal communities across Indian Country by fully funding Contract Support Costs at \$215.9 million. Contract Support Costs enable Tribes to assume responsibility for operating Federal programs by covering the costs to administer the programs. Also, the budget fully funds \$147.6 million for Payments for Tribal Leases, which includes Tribal facility lease agreements under section 105(l) of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, in support of Tribal self-determination.

Through these authorities, Tribes are able to design and administer programs in a manner that best serves their communities, consistent with the Federal government's commitment to Tribal self-determination.

Indian Affairs is also improving access to financial information and strengthening Tribal capacity. In addition, the 2027 budget will continue to support and expand Tribal online account access. Tribal online account access will give Tribes the ability to access account information on demand. Furthermore, Tribes will have the option to receive account statements electronically, thus reducing the costs associated with printing.

On January 23, 2025, President Trump issued a memorandum of support for full Federal recognition for the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina. The budget includes \$5 million in the New Tribes program for the Lumbee Tribe, and the Department will work in consultation with the Tribe on a needs assessment to provide to Congress.

Economic Development

The 2027 budget supports the Administration's priorities for domestic energy abundance and economic development as well as active forest management reforms. BIA's Trust-Natural Resources Management activity supports the stewardship and development of energy resources on trust lands in Indian Country. The request also supports the development, maintenance, and enhancement of forest resources in accordance with sustained yield principles included in forest

management plans. These programs enable Tribal trust landowners to optimize the use of resources, providing benefits such as revenue, jobs, and the protection of traditional resources.

Upholding the Trust Responsibility

The FY 2027 budget includes funding to modernize the probate process and reduce the current decades-old backlog, which will unlock Indian lands for economic development and other uses. The funding will support probate surge operations and performance-driven incentive programs. This funding aligns with the Department's broader modernization agenda and will be developed with Tribal partners to ensure cultural, legal, and operational relevance.

Additionally, the BTFA budget requests funding to provide fiduciary guidance, management, and leadership for Tribal Trust and Individual Indian Money accounts.

The BTFA budget supports these core functions, including trust fund accounting, administration of Individual Indian Money accounts, and management of Tribal trust funds. It also supports the financial systems, internal controls, and records management necessary to ensure accountability and meet fiduciary obligations.

Public Safety and Justice

BIA's Office of Justice Services (OJS) funds law enforcement, corrections, and court services to maintain safe Tribal communities. These programs support 198 law enforcement programs and 101 corrections programs run by Tribes and by BIA as direct services.

OJS funding also supports the Missing and Murdered Unit, including Operation Spirit Return, an initiative implemented in the spring of 2025 by the Trump administration to help solve missing and unidentified persons cases involving American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States. The operation identifies unknown human remains located in or close to Indian Country that are believed to belong to either American Indian or Alaska Native persons and focuses on reuniting those remains with family members and returning them to their Tribal communities. Overall, BIA's budget for Public Safety and Justice activities is \$560.3 million.

Education

President Trump signed The Great American Outdoors Act National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund into law during his first term and the Administration looks forward to again working with Congress on this important issue. Reauthorization will allow BIE to continue utilizing lifecycle efficient methods to address priority deferred maintenance needs through infrastructure repair and replacement to enable BIE operated schools to meet the needs of students and their communities.

The FY 2027 budget provides resources for BIE's core educational mission supporting Tribally controlled and bureau operated schools and operating postsecondary programs of higher

education. Funding levels include a \$6.0 million program increase to the Indian School Equalization Program (ISEP), which will directly benefit elementary and secondary school students by allowing schools to hire additional teachers, administrators, and critical support staff, thereby aiding student achievement. The budget also includes a \$5.5 million program increase for Student Transportation that will increase the reliability of daily transportation for students to foster improved student attendance and academic performance.

BIE's Education Enhancement Program enables BIE to provide critical services and necessary resources to meet the unique needs and priorities of individual Tribes and their schools. The Enhancement program supports the administrative operations at the Education Resource Centers (ERCs), allowing staff to deliver technical assistance aimed at improving instructional practices.

Additionally, many Tribes have established, or are interested in establishing, their own Tribal Education Departments (TEDs). Such TEDs provide a variety of educational services to their students. BIE has made it its mission to support Tribal sovereignty over education by assisting Tribes and their TEDs in building the capacity to coordinate and deliver educational services to their respective Tribal members. The TED Program provides TEDs with critical resources needed to strengthen the management and oversight of a Tribe's educational programs, including BIE-funded schools, school operations, adult education, scholarships, and other programs. For instance, many grantee Tribes and their TEDs have used their TED program funds to research, draft, and establish comprehensive Tribal education codes that align with the Tribe's educational vision in accordance with BIE standards.

Conclusion

In closing, the FY 2027 Budget request supports the Department's core responsibilities to Tribal Nations, American Indians, and Alaska Natives. It sustains essential programs, supports trust asset management, and continues the delivery of services across Indian Country.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.