The Department of Interior (DOI) Listening Session on Tribal Youth and Climate
October 13, 2021, 3:00 pm- 5:00 pm ET

Background

Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (EO 13985) directs agencies to conduct equity assessments of select programs to determine whether underserved communities face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities. Per EO 13985, underserved communities are defined as, “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life...such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” As part of implementing EO 13985, the Department of the Interior (DOI) is assessing the equity of its programs related to three initial focus areas that support the agency's mission and have high potential for equity impact: (1) contracting, (2) recreational visitation, and (3) tribal discretionary grants. DOI contracted with Kearns and West to conduct 15 virtual listening sessions where the public were invited to provide comments and feedback on the barriers that limit access, diversity, and equity as well as recommendations of actions the Department should take to reduce barriers.

On behalf of DOI, Kearns and West facilitated a listening session on Tribal Youth and Climate on October 13, 2021, from 3:00 pm- 5:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of this virtual session, registration totaled 101 participants including youth, those who work or mentor youth, Tribal leaders, and federal employees. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants early in the session with 85 attendees, and two instances where multiple participants joined through one Zoom account bringing the total number of participants to 91.

Participants were invited to voluntarily use Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked about where they were coming from, their age, and their initial thoughts on climate change.

Polling data and registration information showed that participants joined the session from a wide geographic area with larger numbers in Alaska (12), Arizona (7), California (5), Washington, D.C. (6), New Mexico (9), Nebraska (2), Oregon (6), and Virginia (3). Participants also represented states such as Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, and New York.

Ages of participants included both youth and adults, with 20% identifying as a youth mentor, 20% identifying as a high school student, 4% identifying as a middle school student, and 56% selecting the other category (which included college students).

Regarding where participants learn about climate change, participants responded with the following: school, science classes, Tribes, Tribal elders, family, social media, research, social media, and some even mentioned “everywhere”. Many associated climate change with the relocation and displacement of

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1 This meeting summary was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior by Kearns & West, Inc. (K&W) pursuant to an existing IDIQ contract.
indigenous populations, changes in weather, extreme heat conditions, a problem that needs to be solved collectively, a human-made problem, wild fires, habitat loss, and wildlife loss. Lastly, participants were asked through a free response question who inspires them to take climate action, and participants answered with the following: Mother Earth, elders, youth, the animals, the 7 generations, school, future generations, and cultural practitioners.

**Agenda Overview**

The purpose of this listening session was to begin a conversation with Tribal youth about the future of our climate. DOI held this session to further understand the challenges facing Tribal youth, and how to work together on issues of climate and climate change. Keeping this purpose in mind, Kearns & West, DOI, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) developed a two-hour facilitation plan to target youth, specifically middle school, high school, and college students on the topic of climate change, future actions, and opportunities for empowerment.

Miro, an interactive, collaborate virtual whiteboard was used to capture participants’ responses to developed facilitation questions. Prior to the session, participants were sent a session reminder email with instructions on how to use Miro, which included a PDF of Miro Tips and a YouTube video tutorial. Sara Omar, Kearns & West, provided an additional demonstration of the Miro board, with instructions for those uncomfortable with the technology to express their ideas verbally or by using the chat function. Miro provided participants with the space to reflect and respond to the following guiding questions:

- How is climate change impacting your Tribal nation and/or your community?
- How can you help connect people of all generations to work together to solve community problem with honor and respect for the land and environment?
- What types of projects would make a difference in your Tribal community to help with climate change impacts? What areas of expertise does your community need to accomplish these projects?

Utilizing these questions as a framework, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, led participants through a series of discussions. Each question corresponded to a dedicated half hour of discussion through the Miro board, the chat function, or participants’ verbal remarks. Each section began with an introduction to the question, slides with additional context to participants presented by Coral Avery, BIA, and then a dedicated space for conversation and reflection. Each discussion portion of the agenda concluded with a summarization of themes, and its relationship to the goals of the listening session.

In addition to guided facilitation of Miro activities and reflection, the listening session opened with a prayer from Ben Hunter-Francis and welcoming remarks form Kathryn Isom-Clause, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs for Policy and Economic Development. The session closed with remarks from Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, who reiterated that the listening session provided a foundation for future conversation and action among tribal youth around issues of climate and climate change. The session closed with a song performed by Ben Hunter-Francis.

**Themes and Concepts**

Three thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) introduction to youth and climate, (2) moving towards action, and (3) empowering tribal youth with opportunities. A summary of each conversation’s themes is included below.
Introduction to Youth & Climate

This section looked for participants to begin brainstorming answers to the following questions:

- How is climate change impacting your Tribal Nation/community?
- What are the top three most important things, activities, traditions, etc. that might be or already are being impacted by climate change?
- How can you help connect people of all generations to work together to solve community problems with honor and respect for the land and environment?

Participants were asked to describe the issue of climate change as it relates to youth and Tribal nations and communities. Participants’ words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations on this topic were recorded on the Miro board, a screenshot of this board is included as Figure 1: Introduction to Tribal Youth Miro Board Screenshot in Appendix A. Themes that arose from the Miro board included: concerns about drought, extreme temperatures, and impacts to the natural environment. Participants expanded on these concerns to include how climate change impacts fishing, hunting, berry picking, and other cultural activities. This segment of conversation also introduced the complexity of the relationship between elders and youth, where elders hold the knowledge and youth hold the questions.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened additional space for participants to reflect on comments posted on the virtual Miro board or participants’ experiences with climate change. Youth participants added additional considerations towards language and traditional knowledge, as it relates to native populations and their stewardship of Mother Earth. There was also a discussion of the tension between traditional teachings and Western education. Participants pointed to a need for further connection between the teachings of elders and youth.

Moving Towards Action

This segment asked participants to brainstorm how they could act based on the following questions:

- As future leaders, how can you use your voice and skills to make a difference for the environment, while continuing to respect your culture and strengthen your sovereignty?
- How can you share stories of the challenges faced by your community in a way that will influence others to act?
- How would you go about involving elders, Tribal council, other youth, and community members to be actively involved in a climate change resistance initiative?

These questions and reflections on the Miro board moved participants from describing and identifying issues to begin brainstorming and developing solutions that youth could implement around climate and climate change. This discussion built upon previous reflections and sticky notes that emphasized a need for a connection among the elders and the youth for future generations to understand resiliency, strength, and acquiring the necessary wisdom to move actions forward. Participants’ words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations on this topic were recorded on the Miro board, a screenshot of this board is included as Figure 2: Moving Towards Action Miro Board Screenshot in Appendix A.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened the space for additional reflections. Reflections from a youth participant emphasized that working together as people can build a better future that remains resilient to the various climate challenges. To work together, youth must be able to learn from their elders and keep their Tribe’s traditional knowledge before it is too late. Tribal elders were compared to that of a
library, and as each one passes away, it is comparable to a library burning down. To take future action, cultural knowledge must transcend current generations for future generations’ success and enjoyment of the environment.

Empowering Tribal Youth with Opportunities
This section looked for participants to begin brainstorming answers to the following questions:

- What types of education and leadership opportunities would help you and your Tribe address climate change issues (e.g., types of opportunities, emergency preparedness, climate scenario planning, communications, leadership, gardening/agriculture, renewable energy development, business/entrepreneurship; formats for training: in-person workshops, online webinars, etc.)?
- What jobs/careers are you interested in? How might these jobs help your community with climate change issues?
- What can the federal government do to make it easier for you to start on community projects for your Tribe? (e.g., funding, training and education, policy, business/entrepreneurship, formats for training: in-person, workshops, online webinars, etc.)?
- What would empower you and your Tribal nation to take action on climate change?

These questions and reflections on the Miro board moved participants to consider what additional resources or investments would help empower Tribal youth solutions. Participants’ words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations on this section were recorded on a Miro board, and a screenshot of responses is included in Appendix A as Figure 3: Empowering Tribal Youth Miro Board Screenshot.

Themes that arose on the Miro board involve three specific categories of investment: investment in the individual in terms of putting resources towards scholarships and mentorships that allow youth to grow, learn, and contribute to their communities; investment in the community in terms of money going directly into tribal services such as community gardens and waste disposal; and lastly, and investment in self in empowering the imagination of young people to contribute to climate change conversation and action through art.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened the space to allow participants to reflect on points of empowerment or the conversation. Many participants expressed their gratitude in holding a session to begin conversations about these topics and hoped for future conversations. One youth participant reflected on how the world might look without all that divides people, in hopes that the current generation can propose solutions that allow the future generations to have clean air, green grass, animals, and fruits to enjoy. This segment closed with a reflection with a metaphor about building bridges across cultures, rather than fences that cut through our natural landscapes.

Overarching Recommendations
At the conclusion of the session, many participants were thankful for the space to hold these conversations. It is through these reflections that many raised the hope that there could be continuous conversations about tribal youth, climate change, and the impact youth can have on bringing forward innovative solutions. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Participants recommended increased funding to Tribal nations directly. Increasing investment in scholarships and mentorships to native youth, while also holding additional space for continued teachings, workshops, and trainings.
Youth participants recommended and stressed the need for Tribal youth to connect with Elders in their community around language and traditional customs to create innovative solutions rooted in their customs and cultures.
Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to the DOI Listening Session on Tribal Youth and Climate Change. These sticky notes reflect participants’ own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.
Figure 1: Introduction to Youth and Climate
As future leaders, how can you use your voice and skills to make a difference for the environment, while continuing to respect your culture and strengthen your sovereignty?

Crea

Having conversations about what we have lost and how we can continue to be resilient and to continue respecting our mother earth.

Respect our culture by listening to elders, but also listening to mother earth.

Through writing, opportunities to speak at events, and in conversations with those around me.

We will confront the climate crisis with multi-generational strength, wisdom, and resiliency with a multi-generational approach.

We should encourage the tribe to bring their teachings online (offer tech skills) to reach Tribal members outside of the community and share stories and language.

Have a priority or requirement in the BIA TCPD FOA to have tribes that are seeking a risk assessment using a consultant to create learning opportunities for tribal youth/students thru internships.

Visit elders where they are, bring them groceries, talk to them, tell them your concerns, invite them to speak out, in partnership with youth.

The need to protect traditional knowledge that will help protect mother earth.

How do you share stories of the challenges faced by your community in a way that will influence others to take action?

Cultural Recreation, Activities to get members in the environment to inspire further protection.

The best stories are personal ones. Make it as personal as possible. Tell how you are personally affected.

Speaking about the resilience the we have, we inspire people to continue that resilient thinking and way of living.

From a participant in the chat: We the people have to want a better future for our selves and for future generations. As our society changes new solutions to combat climate change are discovered. Furthermore, my tribe has taken the initiative to prevent forest fires by prescribing burnings and taking strict precautions on open fires, campfires and watching drought conditions.

I would encourage them to involve people outside of the community as well as inside. I would encourage them to demand to be part of the conversation happening outside of our specific community. And be confident that the knowledge they have is valuable and may be the key. Any conversation must include not only “recognized experts” in conservation, climate change, industry, and agriculture. Most importantly such as task force would require participation from multiple people with indigenous knowledge, from differing tribal communities. Only collectively can we develop solutions likely to have broad support, which is sustainable into the future. And we’ve seen what happens without indigenous knowledge.

Individuals and communities can achieve success by working together, listening to each other, and building trust. It is important to consider the cultural and social dynamics that influence the way people interact and make decisions. Sharing experiences and perspectives can help to foster understanding and respect for diverse viewpoints. Collaboration among different groups can lead to more effective solutions and outcomes. By recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of each community, we can work towards a common goal of addressing climate change.
Figure 3: Empowering Tribal Youth with Opportunities Miro Board Screenshot