



Intertribal Agriculture Council
100 N. 27th Street, Suite 500, Billings, MT 59101

March 2, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture,
Nutrition, and Forestry
328A Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: IAC Support for the Agriculture Provisions in H.R. 1319 – American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

Dear Leader Schumer, Leader McConnell, Chairwoman Stabenow, and Ranking Member Boozeman:

On behalf of the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) and its Native Farm Bill Coalition, we write in support of H.R. 1319 – the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, and especially the agriculture provisions that will help Tribal producers. The historic and systemic inequities inherent in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) credit and farm programs continue to limit the opportunities for our over 80,000 Tribal producers during the pandemic. The relief envisioned in this reconciliation package will go a long way to help Tribal producers, and all socially disadvantaged producers, ensure they can keep their operations going, feed their communities, and be strong economic drivers in rural America.

Tribal agriculture production and food systems are essential economic and community drivers in Indian Country. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, nearly 80,000 Tribal producers operate on over 59 million acres of land and generate over \$3.5 billion in economic activity. While the full impacts of the pandemic on Tribal agriculture are difficult to quantify, we know that the lack of access and equitable inclusion at USDA has disproportionately impacted food systems in Indian Country for generations, and that the current pandemic is exposing the inequities in the system.

The founding of USDA dates back to 1862, a period that includes federal government sanctioned removal and Homestead Acts transferring Tribal lands to white settlers. Although Native people have been farming this land since time immemorial, Tribal governments and producers were never envisioned as stakeholders in the Department, Tribal producers were not mentioned in the Farm Bill until the early 1990s, and Tribal Colleges and University were not acknowledged as land grant institutions until 1994. The *Keepseagle* settlement provided

financial compensation for Native producers for discrimination by USDA through its Farm Service Agency (FSA) programs, but the funds did not make up for the generations not supported by USDA programs, the millions of acres of land lost in Tribal agriculture, and the many producers who are stuck in a neverending cycle of relying on each year's production just to make it to the next season. Essentially, the systemic nature of the inequities facing Tribal producers limit the ability to build the networth necessary to weather unforeseen impacts to their markets and production.

For example, the average Native farm size is 978 acres and more than twice the average size of white farms (431 acres). However, white farms are more than 3 times as profitable as Native farms despite being less than half the size (total value of production for Native farms is \$58,885 compared to \$193,132 for white farms). This can be attributed to the historical and systemic lack of access to capital, lack of access to USDA programs, and lack of access to technical assistance. These concerns also align with what Tribal producers are saying during the pandemic.

The biggest barriers we continue to hear from our producers are access to credit and concerns of paying down debt coupled with the loss of markets and economic opportunities. In a survey we conducted last year, of the Tribal respondents who participated:

- **86 percent** have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- **85 percent** of producers stated the need for financial assistance and support as a result of the pandemic;
- **79 percent** reported a "Production to Processing" gap; and
- **75 percent** reported that food demand is outpacing the supply.

Further, USDA's COVID-19 response programs have provided limited support to Tribal producers so far. First, the Farmers to Families Food Box program mirrors the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) if USDA implemented Tribal leader requests to provide funding directly to purchase food from local producers. However, due to Farmers to Families Food Box's structure, very few—if any—Tribal governments/entities were able to be purchasers or distributors of the boxes, and very few—if any—Tribal producers sold their products into the program. Further, when Tribal leaders and members of Congress asked USDA to allow the FDPIR CARES Act funding to be used for this exact purpose they were denied.

Next, there is limited data on just how well the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program producer payments served Tribal producers. However, a majority of Tribal agriculture production is in livestock, and bison producers were not included as eligibility until the second round—nearly 5 months into the program. Many Tribal producers instead went to the Small Business Association's program because it was easier to access and receive benefits.

All of these concerns also speak to the need for directed and specific technical assistance, outreach, and opportunities for Tribal producers. Organizations like the IAC and others were established because of the gaps that existed in the federal extension and educational systems which left Tribal producers entirely out of the equation. It was not until 1987 that the IAC's technical assistance network was established as a direct response to a congressional report determining the outsized impacts of the 1980s farm financial crisis had on Tribal producers. It was not until 1990 that the Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program was created as a response to the lack of support Indian Country agriculture received from 1862 land grant

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institutions. And it was not until 1994 that Tribal Colleges and Universities were granted the same land grant status. While a lot has been done through these entities and institutions, it's always been with shoestring budgets trying to make up for nearly 160 years of exclusion or inequitable access. The funding in H.R. 1319 for socially disadvantaged serving entities and institutions is essential to ensure that the technical and outreach networks that exist for Tribal producers and all socially disadvantaged have the resources to not just make it work, but make it work right for our food producers.

Finally, while FSA is seen as a lender of last resort, due to the historic inequities in access to agriculture credit in Indian Country, FSA loans are sometimes the only option for Native producers. Eliminating debt concerns will not only provide Tribal producers with much needed financial relief and freedom, but will allow that money to be reinvested into their operations to find new markets, new ways of feeding people, and new opportunities to adopt more regenerative agriculture practices supporting the conservation and productivity of their lands for generations to come.

The FSA debt relief in H.R. 1319 comes at a time when Tribal producers need the support the most. As market opportunities continue to be limited, many producers are facing tough decisions that would be alleviated with the opportunities presented in this bill. Debt relief is more than wiping the slate clean, it's a critical investment in the future of our Tribal farmers and ranchers during a watershed moment in our history. We fully support the debt relief provisions in H.R. 1319.

The IAC and its Native Farm Bill Coalition fully support H.R. 1319 – the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and its agriculture provisions. We urge its swift passage and implementation to get the much needed debt relief and technical assistance support to Tribal producers across Indian Country.

Sincerely,



Kari Jo Lawrence
Executive Director
Intertribal Agriculture Council
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