

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

February 20, 2025

Doug Burgum
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Secretary Burgum:

We urge you to immediately reinstate any terminated Indian Affairs employees, lift the hiring freeze, officially rescind the deferred resignation and early retirement offers, and instead work to strengthen and grow the Indian Affairs staff to best meet the needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in accordance with our treaty and trust obligations. These damaging actions – implemented without tribal consultation – violate Congressional direction to implement programs and activities funded through appropriations.

We strongly oppose these efforts to diminish the critical staff needed to carry out the federal government's treaty and trust responsibilities, which are well documented and upheld through laws, treaties and agreements with Tribes and their citizens. Without the necessary staff to fulfill federal obligations, Indigenous communities will face the loss of vital services, meaning services for law enforcement, tribal courts, natural resource management, education, firefighters, and road maintenance. These are services that are critical for any community to function effectively.

Furthermore, more than 80 percent of Indian Affairs employees are American Indian or Alaska Natives serving their communities. Indiscriminately firing the Indian Affairs workforce unjustifiably hurts the livelihoods of Native American families, often living in remote areas of the country where unemployment is already exceptionally high.

According to information in the [press](#)¹, positions in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs, and Bureau of Indian Education are impacted by these actions, disproportionately impacting direct-service Tribes. It is well documented by the [Government Accountability Office](#)² that funding for programs across Indian country has been plagued by staff vacancies and skills gaps and that additional staff are needed to address current challenges. In fact, improving federal management of programs that serve Tribes and their members remains on the Government Accountability Office's [High-Risk List](#)³.

Any efforts to diminish already understaffed and underfunded programs further exacerbates already dire conditions in many Tribal communities who rely on services provided by Indian Affairs for their daily existence. When this is paired with the illegal freeze of federal funds that are owed to Tribes to reimburse them for services already performed and the inability of Tribes to draw down their funds, it jeopardizes the way of life and well-being of Native communities.

¹ <https://ictnews.org/news/life-or-death-consequences-layoffs-throw-indian-country-into-turmoil>

² <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106825>

³ <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-119sp>

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The actions of this Administration endanger the sovereign-to-sovereign relationship the federal government has with Tribal Nations.

The federal government must honor its trust responsibility to Tribal Nations. We urge you to revoke all personnel and funding actions that have been initiated and that have already been so detrimental. The well-being of millions of Native Americans and Alaska Natives are in jeopardy.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related
Agencies
United States Senate
Committee on Appropriations



Chellie Pingree
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Interior,
Environment, and Related
Agencies
United States House of
Representatives
Committee on Appropriations