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I am submitting this testimony to highlight the food insecurity and hunger issues that impact tribal communities across the country. I have worked on behalf of tribal governments for over a decade and teach Federal Indian Law as an adjunct professor at the Boston University School of Law.

Thank you, Chairman McGovern and Members of the House Rules Committee, for shining a light on food insecurity among tribal communities. Like many places in America, Indian country is no stranger to hunger. I applaud the Committee's efforts to develop policy proposals to end hunger and the Chairman's outreach to Tribal leaders to understand better how this issue impacts Indian country.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of food insecurity for American Indian/Alaska Native households were double that of non-native households. Whereas one in eight Americans faced food insecurity in 2019, one in four Native Americans were food insecure. The pandemic only exacerbated the problem. The reasons for food insecurity and hunger vary across Indian country. Some common themes include a lack of local food production, high food costs, high rates of unemployment, and few retail food options.

Tribal Food Sovereignty

Sustainable, productive agriculture is an area where tribes can make a meaningful difference in food insecurity within their membership. Communities that can produce their own culturally appropriate, healthy foodstuffs see less food insecurity, especially among children and elders.

To engage in productive agriculture, tribes need access to water. Across the Southwest, tribes struggle to access the water supplies they need to build internal agricultural capacity. This happens despite countless water settlement agreements promising reserved water for the exclusive use of a tribe. Congress should fund these outstanding water settlements to ensure that tribes can access the water they need to build local food systems.

Further, tribes need federal support to protect and preserve their native seed stocks. Since time immemorial, tribes have been utilizing specific varieties of plants for food, medicine, and religious and cultural practices. These plants are an essential part of a culturally relevant diet and help address ongoing issues surrounding diabetes and obesity. Congress should assist tribes in their work to protect heritage seed stocks for the next generation.

Traditional Food Systems

Across the Northwest and Great Lakes, tribes have depended on salmon and other fish as a primary food source. Sadly, environmental changes, climate change, and habitat destruction have devastated fish populations and led to a significant decrease in the ability of tribes to engage in subsistence-level fishing. Over the past five years, numerous tribes have had to limit or completely restrict fishing for specific salmon stock in the Pacific Northwest. Congress should continue working with tribes to support fishery programs and fund tribal-focused climate resilience programs to ensure the rivers and lakes can support robust fish populations.

Federal Food Assistance Programming

Two primary food assistance programs address hunger in Indian country. The first is the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). SNAP is only useful in areas with accessible grocery stores, so FDPIR is the only option for supplemental food assistance in many parts of the country. FDPIR is administered by 105 tribal nations and three state agencies and provides benefits and nutrition education services to approximately 278 federally recognized tribes across the United States. In 2020, the program served approximately 75,000 individuals per month.

Congress should ensure that these programs, especially FDPIR, support the purchase and distribution of healthy, traditional, and locally sourced foods. This will support tribal food sovereignty and provide a more culturally relevant diet. It will also help tribes develop internal agricultural capacity by creating more demand for their products.

The 2018 Farm Bill created the authority for tribes to enter P.L. 93-638 contracts with the USDA through a Self-Determination Demonstration Project. In October 2021, seven tribes entered into agreements with USDA to operate programs under FDPIR. This is an essential first step in supporting tribal food sovereignty. Congress should examine ways to bring similar changes to the SNAP program.

Thank you for your efforts to address this critical issue. I look forward to working with you on policy proposals that could bring meaningful change and end hunger in Indian country.