

## **In Historic Announcement by Agriculture Secretary Vilsack, USDA Commits to Expanding Tribal Self-Determination**

**WASHINGTON, Nov. 15, 2021** - For decades, tribal leaders have requested that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) incorporate tribal self-determination policies to enable greater self-governance and decision making on USDA programs and policies that affect tribal communities. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack heard these requests, and today announced USDA's commitment to expanding tribal self-determination.

The USDA provides leadership on food, agriculture, natural resources, federal lands, rural economic development, and more. While this renewed commitment to self-determination applies across USDA, tribal leaders have raised its importance, particularly within the context of the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service) and the Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

"USDA respects the unique nation-to-nation relationship between the federal government and tribal nations," said Secretary Vilsack. "Today we launch initiatives that reframe and reimagine how USDA supports Indigenous agriculture and tribal communities. These are among the bold actions by the Biden-Harris administration to ensure that USDA appropriately engages tribal nations in a way that aligns with their sovereignty and our nation's trust and treaty responsibility."

Through the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress provided authorization for both USDA agencies to further self-determination efforts in their respective spheres. For the Forest Service, the Tribal Forest Protection Act was amended to allow application of self-determination principles in proposals and projects that protect tribal lands and communities from risks and restore tribal co-management authority on the National Forest System. To date, the Forest Service has executed five (5) Tribal Forest Protection Act demonstration projects across the country, representing collaborations to address restoration, fuels treatments, and range, riparian, and habitat health.

For FDPIR, [the self-determination demonstration project](#) allows FNS to enter into contracts with federally recognized tribes (or Indian Tribal Organizations, "ITOs") and have them select and purchase some of the foods for their tribe. This is a significant change from current operations wherein USDA purchases all foods for FDPIR nationally. The FDPIR self-determination demonstration project is an important step forward in both increasing tribal food sovereignty in the program and in supporting tribal agricultural economies and tribal vendors and producers.

These demonstration projects are examples of how USDA is effectively promoting tribal self-determination. USDA is also advocating for appropriate budget levels, increasing its institutional capacity to enable tribal self-governance efforts, and engaging in government-to-government consultation well ahead of implementation of policies or regulations which may have tribal implications.

Today, USDA commits to three specific and important steps: 1) conduct a review of USDA's current statutory authorities that can be used to empower tribal nations, 2) identify possibilities for increased use of these statutory authorities, and 3) report out of what additional statutory authorities might be needed to more broadly support tribal self-determination, where appropriate, throughout USDA programs.

The work on expanding efforts to assist and promote tribal self-determination begins immediately. USDA's Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) will serve as the primary point of contact, and has already detailed a senior executive from the Department of the Interior (DOI) to help USDA launch this new commitment. The Office of Tribal Relations will continue conducting consultation on the impact of USDA programs on tribal self-governance for tribal nation input and guidance.

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