

CHAIRMAN RUBEN GALLEGO
OPENING STATEMENT

Good afternoon and welcome to the first hearing of the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States in the 116th Congress.

We adjusted the name of this committee to emphasize our renewed and singular focus on the more than 2 million indigenous peoples that we are charged with representing.

As the only committee with exclusive jurisdiction over these issues in the House of Representatives, we have a great responsibility.

As a body, this Congress can make countless improvements to the lives and well-being of indigenous peoples.

That starts here – in this Subcommittee – where we will spend the coming months seeking solutions to address the issues these communities have identified.

As a subcommittee, we will:

- Examine the significance of tribal sovereignty and self-determination;
- Strengthen tribal consultation and honor our nation’s trust responsibilities;
- Ensure environmental justice for tribal communities;
- Support tribal control of their own lands and resources;
- Work closely with Tribes to identify and protect sacred sites;
- Uphold our obligations to improve the health, safety, and delivery of justice to tribal people; and lastly
- Ensure that all indigenous peoples and Tribal governments are treated fairly, as co-equals with dignity and respect.

We have a lot of ground to cover, and I look forward to working with my friend and fellow Marine Ranking Member Cook (Oorah!) - and the rest of my colleagues - on addressing these and other pressing issues.

Today, we'll focus specifically on the impacts that climate change is having on tribal communities.

These communities are on the front lines of the climate change battle.

And despite contributing almost nothing to climate change, they face some of the worst impacts.

From floods and wildfire, to drought and rising sea levels, Indigenous peoples face existential threats to their traditional way of life - including disruptions to subsistence hunting and fishing, as well as their commercial activities and tourism enterprises.

This is especially true for tribes along coastal areas, who are already seeing changes in their lands - including the Quinault Nation, whose people live on the frontlines of extreme weather risks from flooding to tsunamis.

These climate-related disasters are forcing Indigenous communities to make some very heartbreaking choices

- like the Tohono O'odham Nation who had to resort to FEMA for disaster support after hurricanes caused severe flooding
- or the Newtok [New-tohk] Village in Alaska, who had to choose between relocating their entire community or losing access to safe drinking water.

And these are not isolated incidents. Throughout Indian Country the effects of climate change are evident. And they are increasing at an alarming rate.

I'd like to also remind us all that the challenges facing tribal communities are a mere microcosm of the larger climate change picture. And that the harms of inaction in Indian country will affect us all.

Tribes are stewards of millions of acres of trust and federally recognized lands that provide habitat for more than 500 endangered species; contain over 13,000 miles of rivers and nearly 1 million lakes.

They also house stunning natural treasures like Antelope Canyon in my home state of Arizona that provide tourism opportunities for visitors from near and far – but are at risk of erosion and other harms as the climate changes.

That's why it is important that we work hand-in-hand to overcome the collective challenges that we will face.

Climate change is ignorant of reservation boundaries and treaty land maps. And yet, indigenous peoples are often left to fend for themselves in addressing the issues that arise – and that's just not right. We are all in this together.

The cultures, spiritual practices, and economies of many Indigenous people have already evolved to adapt to local environmental changes. This knowledge - accumulated over generations of historical and cultural connection with the surrounding environment - is integral to this committee's work.

In my view, this makes us natural partners in developing climate adaptation strategies- both on tribal lands, and for the surrounding regions.

This Committee's partnership with Tribes to address climate change and other issues affecting Indian Country starts today.

To our witnesses, thank you for traveling long distances to share your experiences and educate this Committee about the impact that climate change has on your community.

I look forward to your hearing testimony, and I hope that our Members not only identify with your story, but also learn from you and your expertise as we develop ways to address climate change head-on.

I now would like to recognize the Ranking Member, my esteemed colleague, Mr. Cook, for his opening statement.