



BRACE for Climate Extremes...

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The Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States,

hearing on The Impact of Climate Change on Tribal Communities

Testimony by Shirley Buzzard, Ph.D, President of the BRACE Institute

Many thanks to the subcommittee on Indigenous People for calling attention to the effect of climate change on Native Americans. The impact of climate change is enormous to the health and livelihood of many Native Americans but most urgently for those who live on low-lying islands and coastal communities.

In May of 2016, Rep. Grijalva sponsored a forum on Confronting the Rising Tide: The Climate Refugee Crisis. Among those invited to speak at that forum were representatives of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, a representative from the Arctic Council and a representative from the Embassy of the Marshall Islands. My company, Heartlands International, a Native American Owned small business, was pleased to host some of the visitors to Washington DC for that event. In our discussions during their visit, it became clear that the people who live on the disappearing islands are unequipped to deal with the federal bureaucracy and fundraising for their relocation. Taking a few days off from their work to travel to Washington DC was a huge sacrifice for them and their families. The functioning of the US government and other potential donors is bewildering to them.

They asked Heartlands to form a nonprofit which would serve as an intermediary for them in leveraging funds, reporting, and providing technical assistance to them. In response to their request, we created The Institute called The Building Resilient Communities for Climate Extremes (BRACE Institute) a 501(c)(3). Our objective is to provide support and technical services for the relocation of whole communities while keeping their cultural integrity. Initially BRACE is partnering with the following communities. These are all communities of between 200 and 1000 people that need to completely relocate in the next three to five years:

- The Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Citimacha-Choctaw.
- The Alaskan communities of Shishmaref, Kivalina, Newtok and Quinhagak.
- The Quinalt Indian Nation in Tahdah, Oregon.

Community relocation is a multi-sectoral problem. All the communities mentioned have maritime economies and if they move very far inland, they will have to learn new ways of making a living including fish farming, greenhouse gardening and other skills. As the education level of the older members of these communities is marginal, they are depending heavily on young people to lead the way.

This is the only the beginning. All coastal Alaskan communities will have to move soon. Estimates are that there are already 14 million climate refugees in the world. These are people who have moved to new cities or countries as individuals or families because of job loss, famine, and other climate extremes. There is limited experience with the relocation of whole communities. Responding to this urgent need, BRACE works with partners in the business and labor sectors for technical assistance and job training. We partner with Illinois State University in Normal (ISU) to provide technical assistance and research. We also work with the Laborer's International Union of North America (LiUNA) on housing construction and jobs skills training. BRACE is a multi-disciplinary and global support center for communities that need to relocate due to climate change

BRACE is initially targeting low-lying islands in the U.S. We also are learning from the Marshall Islanders who have moved to Springdale, AK as to some of the health and other issues for climate refugees. Many of the Pacific Islands will also disappear before long.

BRACE Institute employs a classic community development approach within each community. This includes a highly participatory methodology of helping people make decisions for themselves and building the capacity of communities to make their own decisions. We place emphasis on building the leadership skills of young community members and women. A multidisciplinary approach fosters a better understanding of the issues in both the origin and destination communities. The complex problem calls for a multifaceted solution. BRACE monitors carefully and documents what works as thousands of communities worldwide will have to relocate in coming years.

There are dozens of organizations working to mitigate climate change and postpone relocation by building sea walls or houses on stilts. All of these efforts are welcome, but they are short-term and often very costly solutions. BRACE is the only organization that works with communities on total relocation and the design of new, green communities and assistance with learning new job skills.

There main issues we are encountering as we start up are, of course, funds for the organization and for the construction of new communities. The construction of totally new communities is very costly so where possible we promote re-location in or near existing communities. Also, BRACE wants to be cautious about raising expectations and assuring that the communities take the lead with BRACE as a supporting partner. Community members know what they need to do and, in many cases, how to do that. The Choctaw and Quinault already have excellent designs for new green communities and have located land they want to purchase. They urgently need a support organization that can provide funding, management skills, and technical assistance on construction, and job training.

We are very grateful to be included in these hearings. I am happy to answer your questions.