



USDA TRIBAL BUFFALO PARTNERSHIP

Progress Update Spring 2024



Background. Tribal nations have made clear for decades to both the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) that they are invested in the restoration of the American Buffalo - for food security, cultural and spiritual revitalization, economic development, and grasslands conservation - and that they expect us to ensure its eligibility for our relevant federal programming and resources. In direct response to this request, the USDA–DOI Tribal Buffalo Partnership does just that.

The American buffalo¹ are an essential and largely self-sufficient food source and a keystone species for prairie ecosystems. Buffalo enhance soil development, assist with prairie water retention, restore native plants and wildlife, and promote carbon sequestration, among others. Buffalo also hold a place of reverence and cultural importance for many Native American Tribes. They were relied upon for sustenance, shelter, tools, medicine, and cultural practices.

Once numbering close to 60 million, in the late 1800s, encouraged by federal policy, buffalo herds across the U.S. were significantly depleted, down to less than 1,000 animals. The federal policies were aimed at disrupting independent food sources for Tribes, these policies combined with economic drivers destabilized food access and ways of life for many Tribal Nations. Where there were once millions of buffalo, there are now only around half a million within the U.S. in commercial and/or conservation herds, with around 20,000 in Tribally managed herds.

The USDA and DOI are working together on a joint Tribal Buffalo Partnership, which leverages Tribal, USDA and DOI investments with streamlined policy improvements, increased access to federal programs, and private partnership resources. In the pursuit of these efforts both departments have worked closely with the Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), and other important partners and made significant progress to support Tribal buffalo conservation.

¹ The American buffalo's scientific name is *Bison* and it belongs to the bovine family. Many scientists use the formal scientific name, *Bison*. The National Bison Association encourages the name "Bison" to differentiate the "American buffalo" from the international buffalo species, the Asian Water buffalo, and African Cape buffalo, as the "American Buffalo" is not related to these international "buffalo" species. However, most Tribal Nations still prefer the common name "buffalo" as reflected in the name of the InterTribal Buffalo Council, and the PBS documentary "The American Buffalo." Therefore, USDA and DOI also often use the term "buffalo," particularly when working with Tribal Nations. The terms "bison" and "buffalo" are often used interchangeably in North America, and both refer to the same North American animal species from the Great Plains, *Bison bison*.

USDA TRIBAL BUFFALO ACCOMPLISHMENTS

IDENTIFIED INVESTMENT AREAS

1. PROCUREMENT
2. PROCESSING
3. INSPECTION
4. NUTRITION/COOKING
5. PRODUCER RESOURCES
6. ANIMAL HEALTH
7. INSURANCE/EMERGENCY COVERAGE
8. CONSERVATION
9. ANIMAL ACCESS/FEDERAL BUFFALO HERDS
10. PUBLIC LANDS/CO-STEWARDSHIP

Over the last few years, USDA has improved its policies and programs to ensure buffalo are not excluded from our existing programs, and entered formal agreements with Tribal serving and Tribally run organizations that complement and advance the work of Tribal buffalo restoration and conservation. This work includes propagation of native grasses and seeds, strengthening of buffalo markets, purchasing of buffalo and Indigenous foods for USDA programs, and strengthening value-added buffalo meat processing, among others.

PROCUREMENT

At \$3 billion, USDA is one of the largest purchasers of food in the United States, yet many smaller, local, and Tribal producers have trouble participating in our contracts. Tribes have expressed frustration that local and Tribal producers cannot participate in Tribal federal nutrition programs on their reservations, and buffalo producers have shared significant barriers to entry.

Bison Purchase Pilot: Incorporating Indian Country Buffalo into Tribal Nutrition Programs. USDA launched a new [interagency pilot project](#) aimed at offering more localized ground buffalo meat for Tribal communities participating in the “commods” or Food Distribution Program on Indians Reservations (FDIPR). The pilot responds to feedback about how USDA utilizing its purchasing power created barriers for midsized and Tribal buffalo producers in meeting minimum purchase quantity, availability of federal inspection, and seasonality of the purchase. These changes align with Indigenous Knowledge (IK or ITEK) on animal handling practices and better recognize state and Tribal jurisdiction in regulating these practices. The producers participating in the first pilot include the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Brown Otter Buffalo, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, and Dakota Pure Bison operating on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation. The goal is to continue the pilot this year and expand to more states in coming years.

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Institutional Federal Meals: DOI Indigenous Foods Hubs. USDA is supporting DOI's Indigenous Food Hubs Initiative to provide technical assistance for serving culturally appropriate, Tribally produced, and traditional foods in meal programs at schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) and detention centers operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). This includes finding Tribal producers as well as identifying resources for important steps such as training for the school cooks and equipment for the schools to be able to cook from scratch.

Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program. Under the American Rescue Plan Act, USDA is partnering with Tribal governments through non-competitive cooperative agreements in the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program, which provides funds to Tribal, state, and territorial governments to purchase foods, including buffalo, from underserved and Tribal producers for distribution to their community. Projects have ranged from after school back packs to elders food boxes. Congress subsequently authorized a drawdown from Commodity Credit Corporation funding for the LPFA Plus program, where USDA is administering up to \$112 million in noncompetitive cooperative agreements to extend initial LFPA agreements and partner with new Tribes in their food sovereignty efforts. The Tribal demand for the program has been extraordinary and it widely seen as having a significant impact by local and Tribal producers.

PROCESSING

Tribes and Tribal producers have shared that USDA programs often appear tailored to livestock and poultry and are not inclusive of bison and other indigenous animal species. Often these animals and these Tribal business structures do not cash flow in the same manner as more western animals. When submitting comment on program development in consultation, Tribes shared that transporting live buffalo to stationary facilities was perceived as an unnecessary stressor on the animal and affects both the quality of the meat and the humane handling of the animal.

Buffalo Processing Eligible for Indigenous Animals Meat Processing Grant. For the first time USDA created a [meat processing program](#) designed for the unique processing requirements of Indigenous animals. This program was designed with direct request and input from Tribal leaders and acknowledges the unique role of Indigenous animals as an important protein source for Tribal communities. This program allowed for up to \$50 million dollars in grants. Approximately \$300M in demand was identified across 70 applications. Buffalo were explicitly included as eligible animals, as was field harvesting – an important cultural aspect for many Tribes.

Mobile Meat Processing: Model Mobile Field Processing Trailer. Tribes have made clear they want mobile meat processing better incorporated into USDA's meat processing funding and inspection plans. Tribes share that transporting animals to stationary facilities live is considered an unnecessary stressor on the animal and affects both the quality of the meat and the humane handling of the animal. USDA Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) entered into a cooperative

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agreement with ITBC to create a model mobile harvest trailer which incorporates contemporary food safety standards and traditional field harvesting practices. The model trailer cost approximately \$80,000, can hold up approximately four animals, is highly mobile for tight and challenging terrain, and has been operational for nearly a year and is widely viewed as a success and an education tool.

Food Safety and Inspection Service Administrator Participates in Traditional Buffalo Field Harvesting Event. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) Administrator and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) team traveled to South Dakota to learn about the importance of humane cultural field harvesting to Tribes and participated directly in a traditional buffalo field harvest to better understand the process and nuances.

INSPECTION

USDA recognizes buffalo as a “nonamenable” species, meaning that they are not subject to federal USDA inspection in value-added processing for sale. Buffalo may still be considered an “amenable” species under state law, which may provide greater flexibility in how the animal can be harvested. In a listening session series to USDA, Tribal and non-tribal bison producers expressed buffalo should remain a nonamenable species nationally. In addition, more Tribal governments are beginning to establish buffalo processing facilities and seek to incorporate inspection into their facilities and are exploring adopting food inspection authorities within their land.

USDA Support for Keeping Buffalo a Non-Amendable Species. USDA was asked by Congress to investigate whether buffalo/bison should have its classification changed from a “non-amendable” (not subject to federal inspection) species to an “amenable” (subject to federal meat inspection and reimbursement) species. USDA held consultations in coordination with both the National Bison Association and ITBC. The near unanimous position during both sets of consultations was to keep buffalo as “non-amendable.” USDA reported back to Congress this important perspective.

Bison Purchase Pilot: Respecting Federal Law and State Inspections. The USDA interagency pilot project previously discussed above is aimed at offering more localized buffalo meat for Tribal communities participating in the Food Distribution Program on Indians Reservations Tribal food box program. One of the significant barriers shared by the smaller and Tribal producers was that most of them use state inspection, as it is permitted under federal law for buffalo as a non-amenable species, but USDA procurement was requiring federal inspection. The pilot project adjusted to honor state inspections and federal inspections and decrease this barrier to entry into contracting.

Increasing Pool of Tribal Food Inspectors: “Bootcamps.” Tribal nations across the country are standing up new meat processing facilities to service their and surrounding communities. The requirements to serve as a USDA meat and food inspector broadly include a four-year degree in a relevant field or a high school diploma with one-year of relevant experience. The Office of Tribal Relations and the Food Safety and Inspection Service are coordinating with the American

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Meat Science Association (AMSA) and Tribal Agriculture Fellowship (TAF) to develop and host two bootcamps in targeted locations in Indian Country. These bootcamps will provide aspiring Tribal food inspectors with the tools to competitively apply for federal food inspection positions.

NUTRITION/COOKING

Tribes have shared that they want USDA and DOI to better incorporate buffalo into our federal nutrition programs as well as increase education about its nutrition content and use. As such, the Office of Tribal Relations has entered into cooperative agreements on cooking, and the Food and Nutrition Service has increased the incorporation into their programs.

Created Buffalo Cooking Videos. In support of the USDA Indigenous Food Sovereignty work, the OTR partnered with the [North American Traditional Food Systems \(NATIFS\)](#) to create a series of videos on how to combine and cook traditional and foraged foods with the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations package foods, including a [recipe involving buffalo](#) by James Beard award winner Chef Sean Sherman (Oglala).

Researched Buffalo Nutritional Content. USDA researched the nutritional content of free-range bison and made it publicly available on the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) [FoodData Central](#) database so it can be used a variety of users, including researchers, policy makers, academicians and educators, nutrition and health professionals, product developers, and others.

Food and Nutrition Service Strengthened Support for Serving Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs. FNS created a [landing page](#) for a suite of resources designed to support serving Indigenous foods, including buffalo, in USDA Child Nutrition Programs. FNS also updated two guidance memoranda. TA 01-2023: [Crediting Traditional Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs](#) provides guidance on incorporating traditional Indigenous foods that meet Child Nutrition Program meal pattern requirements and includes an updated and expanded list of traditional Indigenous foods that credit the same as similar foods currently listed in the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#), including buffalo, hazelnuts, steamed lambs' quarters, and wild raspberries. The second memorandum, SP 01-2016, CACFP 01-2016, SFSP 01-2016: [Procuring Local Meat, Poultry, Game, and Eggs for Child Nutrition Programs – REVISED](#), was updated with a technical change intended to reduce potential barriers to accessing domesticated and wild game animals including buffalo and reminds Child Nutrition Program operators to comply with all applicable Federal, State, and local, including Tribal, laws and regulations regarding inspection requirements for game animals. This memorandum clarifies that FNS does not place any additional requirements on Child Nutrition Program operators when serving game meat, such as buffalo, venison, and reindeer. These updated memos will facilitate serving game meat and other foods important to Indigenous diets in Child Nutrition Program meals and snacks.

USDA Expanded Access to Traditional Indigenous Foods in Schools. Through the Fiscal Year 2024 [Supporting the Use of Traditional Indigenous Foods in the Child Nutrition Programs Cooperative Agreement](#), FNS is awarding a total of \$2 million in grants to up to four

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organizations – led and primarily staffed by members of Federally Recognized Tribes and/or Native Hawaiians. These organizations will provide regionally focused training and technical assistance to school nutrition professionals in schools serving Tribal communities. The training and technical assistance will focus on procurement, preparation, and crediting of traditional Indigenous foods, such as buffalo. Funds will be used to increase the use of traditional Indigenous foods in school lunch, school breakfast, summer meals, meals and snacks served to children after school, and culturally relevant nutrition education for students.

PRODUCER RESOURCES

Tribal buffalo producers have shared that they do not feel included in USDA’s resources for producers. In addition, they share many of the same challenges as all Indian Country producers with DOI and USDA not being fully integrated and coordinated on agricultural leasing. USDA has worked to open the same resources to buffalo producers and to better coordinate with DOI.

Handbook: Native Producers on Transitioning from Cattle to Bison. As part of USDA’s Indigenous Food Sovereignty work, USDA coordinated with ITBC to develop a [preliminary user-guide](#) for considerations that Tribal cattle ranchers can use if they are interested in transitioning to managing a buffalo herd, including cost considerations, best practices in herd management, and equipment needs.

Handbook & Curriculum: Tribal Buffalo Humane Handling. While buffalo remains a non-amenable species, Tribes have requested guidance on how to modify federal humane handling (FSIS) guidelines to better recognize traditional harvesting practices. The Office of Tribal Relations entered into cooperative agreements with the Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) to prepare and make available: (1) a handbook to provide best practices for humane handling and harvesting of buffalo in the field; and (2) a hands-on curriculum and training focused on food sovereignty and food safety.

Pilot Project: USDA Places Agricultural Technical Assistance Experts Directly with Tribal Nations. OTR in partnership with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has entered into cooperative agreements with the Blackfoot Nation, Fort Belknap Indian Community, and Muscogee (Creek) Nation to empower these Tribal nations to directly assist their producers navigate USDA and DOI’s agricultural resources and processes. The partnerships are intended to strengthen the government-to-government relationship with Tribal communities, and better address unique issues in Indian Country like those raised by Tribal buffalo producers.

USDA and Intertribal Buffalo Council Enter into a Formal MOU. USDA entered a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ITBC in October 2023. The MOU outlines USDA’s commitment to supporting restoration of Tribal buffalo and supporting ITBC and their partners’ efforts to increase resources to Tribal buffalo producers.

USDA OTR Hires a Special Policy Advisor on Tribal Agricultural Lands. OTR and the Administrator for FSA Agency have joined together to hire USDA’s first Special Policy Advisor

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on Tribal Agricultural Lands. In this role, the special policy advisor is assisting USDA's Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area to better meet the needs of farmers and ranchers on the ground and building institutional bridges with the BIA to coordinate agricultural leases, permits and eligibility requirements for USDA agricultural programs operating in Tribal communities. Streamlining these processes will help buffalo and all Indian Country producers.

USDA Works with BIA to Update Agricultural Leasing Regulations. BIA is entering into Tribal consultations to update BIA Agricultural Leasing Regulations. USDA worked closely with the BIA to improve opportunities for agricultural conservation efforts, to reduce barriers for participation in USDA farming and ranching programs on BIA-managed trust and restricted-fee lands and streamline their regulations where both agencies' responsibilities overlap.

USDA & DOI Create Permanent Interagency Working Group on Tribal Agricultural Lands. Over the years there have been three MOUs between USDA and DOI directing both Departments to increase coordination to improve customer service to Tribal producers. USDA and DOI are working together to build a permanent Interagency Working Group on Tribal Agricultural Lands to ensure we successfully change the way both agencies support agriculture throughout Indian Country.

ANIMAL HEALTH

USDA administers resource and a national framework for ensuring the health of plants and livestock from invasive pests and diseases. Historically, much of these resources have targeted livestock, with an ongoing partnership in the Greater Yellowstone Area to address *brucellosis*. Additional research has been needed to provide parity in understanding buffalo health considerations. More recently, USDA has worked to give buffalo health the same important attention as all livestock health.

Strengthening and Expansion of Brucellosis Quarantine Facilities. USDA and DOI are working together to investigate resources to assist in the expansion of federal and Tribal quarantine facilities for Yellowstone buffalo. The historically decimated buffalo population has left genetic diversity as a very important component of buffalo herd maintenance, and the Yellowstone buffalo genetics are one of the most important sources for successful national genetic diversification. Yellowstone National Park has the largest publicly managed buffalo herd in the U.S. with around 4,800 animals. Beginning in 2018, the park, in coordination with several federal and state partners and Tribal Nations, started the Bison Conservation Transfer Program to identify migrating buffalo that do not have *brucellosis* and transfer them to new areas as an alternative to sending them to slaughter. Since 2019, nearly 300 buffalo have been transferred to 28 other Tribes across 12 states, which has been the largest transfer of Yellowstone buffalo among Native American Tribes in history. Expansion of facilities will allow for the safe increase in buffalo quarantine for increase genetic diversification of buffalo stock nationwide.

Support for Animal Disease Preparedness Including Buffalo Research. In Fiscal Year 2023, USDA hosted 287 Tribal officials representing 56 Tribal nations in workshops providing technical assistance to develop animal and plant health emergency response plans, initiate MOUs, and coordinate logistical exercises. These trainings correspond with funding available for

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Tribal nations to better understand, mitigate, and respond to animal, food, and agriculture disease outbreaks. For Fiscal Year 2024, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announced \$500,000 through the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program. This past year, USDA awarded over \$460,000 for four Tribal projects ranging from outreach and education for Tribal producers to a study of a recently emerging disease outbreak facing buffalo herds.

USDA Conducts Review Proposing to Make *Brucella* Easier to Research. The prevalence of *brucellosis* across buffalo in the Greater Yellowstone Area continues to be an impediment to Tribes looking to restore their buffalo herds and the genetic diversity of herds nationwide. In its biennial review, APHIS released a proposed rule considering removing *brucella* from the Select Agents and Toxins list. This step would allow for more research on vaccinations and diagnosis, making all livestock vulnerable to *brucellosis* safer, and will help us better protect our livestock economy. This change follows best available science on modern agricultural practices.

INSURANCE/EMERGENCY COVERAGE

USDA Expands Research on *M. Bovis* and Buffalo. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service engaged Tribal buffalo herd managers on *mycoplasma bovis* (*m. bovis*) outbreaks. Through the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program, USDA is funding research in partnership with ITBC on potential disease management theories for buffalo.

Livestock Indemnity Program Expanded to Include *M. Bovis* for Buffalo. The Farm Service Agency added buffalo herd losses from *m. bovis* as an eligible trigger under the Livestock Indemnity Program to provide buffalo equal treatment with cattle livestock, which provides producers facing excess of normal mortality in their herds with a financial benefit of 75 percent the average fair market value of the animal(s) impacted.

CONSERVATION

Grasslands are the most threatened ecosystem in the world. The grasslands ecosystem provides some of the most economic value and significant food security to our nation, and its health is of national importance. Buffalo is a keystone species in restoring the health of the U.S. grasslands.

USDA-DOI Enters into Historic Public Private Buffalo Conservation Partnership with Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC), and Native American in Philanthropy (NAP), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and The Nature Conservancy (TNC). USDA and DOI announced a historic new Buffalo Restoration Partnership between NAP, ITBC, WWF and TNC. This partnership was formed to best leverage our federal investments to restore buffalo herds on Tribal lands together with private philanthropic investments and partnerships. The goal of the partnership is to expand and include all interested philanthropic partners, and to provide guided direction from the Tribes on investments.

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New Cooperative Agreements to Expand Native Grasses and Forbs. The Office of Tribal Relations has entered into two cooperative agreements with the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators (TAP) and the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) to expand native grass and forbs seeds for pollinators, grasslands, and working lands restoration which will benefit cattle and buffalo throughout the grasslands.

- The TAP agreement includes work to improve access to USDA's resources and programming for our Tribal partners and producers through educating consumers, agency staff, and federal policy decision makers about native grasses and forbs that complement native grassland conservation and livestock consumption. TAP will partner with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to update the NRCS state foraging seed lists to incorporate more native grasses and forbs and amend the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) reimbursement for seeding as appropriate.
- The IAIA agreement focuses on improving access to USDA's resources and programming for 1994 Tribal Land-Grant Colleges and Universities (1994 TCUs), Tribal partners, and producers through educating consumers, agency staff, and federal policy decision makers about the cultural importance of pollinators and their products in relation to grasslands restoration.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Increases Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Research Collaborations for Grasslands Restoration. ARS created collaborations with 1994 TCUs to promote Indigenous Knowledge and Food Systems. Cooperative agreements between ARS and United Tribes Technical University and ARS and Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College have been implemented to rematriate traditional cultivars and develop propagation techniques for culturally important native plant species.

Public Private Conservation Convenings with Native American in Philanthropy. USDA entered into a cooperative agreement to encourage public-private partnerships in Tribal conservation and Tribal buffalo projects. NAP will organize a series of convenings with philanthropy to encourage Tribes to leverage their federal grants and investments for gap funding.

Improving Quality and Uniformity of Natural Resources Conservation Service Buffalo Restoration Assistance Opportunities. Tribal Leadership has recommended to the Chief in multiple National level consultations that the NRCS should engage Tribal bison subject matter experts to improve the quality and the geographic uniformity of NRCS's technical and financial assistance related to bison restoration. As a result, the NRCS has taken multiple actions to address these recommendations including,

1. Subject matter experts at the national headquarters created EQIP scenarios for three types of fences suitable for buffalo management and made these scenarios easy for individual states to adopt and make available to their producers.
2. Developed a draft revision to the Conservation Practice Standard 528 Grazing Management which was more inclusive to buffalo and elk. The draft conservation practice standard went to the federal register for review on February 2, 2024.

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3. NRCS is working with Tribal subject matter experts and FSA to develop regional bison range seeding recommendations for use in the FSA Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and NRCS conservation planning and programs.
4. NRCS, FSA and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) are working with ITBC and Tribal herd managers on two pilot programs. One of the primary goals of both pilots is to improve USDA buffalo restoration technical and financial assistance on all associated conservation practices, e.g., grazing management, fencing, range and pasture seedings, watering facilities, pipelines, and water wells.

ANIMAL ACCESS/FEDERAL BUFFALO HERDS

USFS Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie Tribal Buffalo Donation. The Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie houses one of the few USFS managed buffalo herds. Buffalo were introduced at Midewin in October 2015 as a 20-year experiment in restoring the landscape to the native tallgrass prairie. Midewin began working with ITBC in 2018 to find Tribes interested in obtaining surplus buffalo. Through this partnership the Midewin has been able to donate approximately 25 buffalo to Tribes, adding to their herd diversity and ability to continue to grow their food sovereignty. Midewin plans to continue this practice as opportunities arise.

PUBLIC LANDS/CO-STEWARDSHIP

USDA and DOI, are the two largest public land managers in the federal government. USDA's U.S. Forest Service manages the 193-million-acre National Forest System (including the National Grasslands) and between the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the National Park Service (NPS), DOI manages around 413-million-acres. Tribes have consistently vocalized their frustrations with federal land management practices conflicting with traditional Indigenous land management practices and the need for increase collaborative partnerships on federally managed lands.

U.S. Forest Service Clarifies Tribal Trust Lands are Eligible as “Base Property” for Grazing Permits on National Forests and National Grasslands. USFS reviewed rangeland management program policies, and identified a need to clarify the flexibilities available for base property requirements to ensure that the USFS grazing program aligns with its goals and policies for Tribal lands. Specifically, Tribal trust land can be used for satisfying the base property requirement. This gives Tribes and Indian Country producers the same status as all other producers.

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