

2024 USDA TRIBAL CONSULTATION AND LISTENING SESSION  
REPORT OUT

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)  
Water-Savings Commodities Program  
August 26, 2024  
Virtual Meeting

**Mission Areas:** Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC)

**Agencies:** Farm Service Agency (FSA)

**Consulting Officials:**

- Alyssa Charney, Senior Advisor, FSA
- Zach Ducheneaux, Administrator, FSA

**Facilitator:** Betsy Rakola, Acting Director, Office of Tribal Relations (OTR)

**I. Opening Prayer, Welcome, and Opening Remarks**

- Acting Director Rakola opened with the purpose of the Water-Savings Commodities Program.
- Senior Advisor Charney provided an overview of the methodology and factors which informed the formula for funding distribution to irrigation districts in 11 Western States, plus Texas.

**II. Nation to Nation Consultation (Tribal government officials)**

*A. Reclamation Projects*

- A Tribal leader expressed concern about the many programs being announced, including those within reclamation, and how USDA's program fits in with those.
- USDA clarified that program funding distribution is formula based and therefore would not require a competitive application.

*B. Funding Notifications*

- A Tribal leader raised concern regarding limited grant application submission timeframes. In some instances, USDA would allow a two-month application time window from the time of the announcement to the deadline. This time crunch gives little notice to Tribal grant writers, thus limiting the opportunities in Indian Country to apply for USDA funding.
- USDA clarified that there is no deadline for the Water-Savings Commodities program as with other announcements, as awards will be made based on a formula for distribution rather than on competitive applications. USDA acknowledged the concern for funding amounts will not address all irrigation needs.

*C. Allotments within Tribal Lands*

- A Tribal leader inquired about allotment water rights for allottees. The Tribal leader was interested to know how producers on allotted land with water rights could participate in the program.

- USDA clarified that primary funding has gone to irrigation districts rather than individual producers. USDA noted that the feedback is helpful to inform the current phase of the program, which is in preliminary discussions with the recipient districts, and committed to continued engagement.

*D. Funding Use*

- A Tribal leader inquired about allowable funding uses of the program with the example of flood-based irrigation for alfalfa production shifting to a sprinkler irrigation. Many Tribes have not developed agriculture but are working on expanding agricultural activity. How would expansion and development become eligible?
- USDA responded indicating shifts in irrigation practices would certainly be eligible. USDA's mandate is to ensure that activities fund maintained or expanded production of crops which may result in shifts of management structures, systems-level or farm-level changes.

*E. BIA Irrigation Infrastructure*

- A Tribal leader shared that BIA irrigation lines of Indian irrigation projects were constructed between the 1920s and 1930s. The question of whether construction of new irrigation lines would be eligible for funding was asked.
- USDA explained expenses for each project would be based on project-by-project assessments to identify whether activities would benefit from water savings and reduced water consumption as it relates to upgrades of existing infrastructure and construction of new infrastructure. The program is outcome based with a focus on solution oriented, creative strategies. The program is not a competitive program requiring an application. Utilizing data analysis USDA will identify eligible entities, then contact them to discuss possibilities of collaboration. USDA intends to make preliminary selections and enter into conversations.

*F. Tribal Nation Funding Distribution*

- A Tribal leader expressed concern of smaller Tribes having the opportunity to access water savings commodities program funds due to their smaller farm size, and land base as opposed to larger Tribes with larger farms and land base. Often larger Tribes receive the lion's share of funding, which is unfair to smaller Tribal nations who are also in need of irrigation infrastructure updates. Furthermore, county level data for Tribal reservations that are located in multiple counties and utilize multiple water resources are not available to Tribes. Tribes then rely on BIA or Tribal data that accounts for surface water and groundwater.
- USDA informed participants county level data specific to watersheds, such as percent of irrigated land using pressurized or flood systems; water drawn from surface water sources; distribution of different types of crops were reviewed. USDA acknowledged Tribal data is often missing. USDA would prefer to have data on the size and need of projects, but that data is often unavailable for Tribal areas.

*G. Other Comments*

## USDA Report Out on Tribal Consultation on Water-Savings Commodities Program-FSA.

- USDA will take the input provided by Tribal leaders. Moving forward USDA will work to identify available data and ranking criterion. In identifying potential selections within the Tribal set-asides, there will be conversations to discuss the identified selections and whether the Tribe or Tribal projects sees a good fit.

### **III. Closing Remarks**

- USDA officials thanked Tribal leaders for their input and committed to announcing future actions publicly.

### **IV. Post-Consultation Actions**

- On November 22, 2024, USDA announced \$45 million in Tribal awards for the Water Saving Commodities via a press release at <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/11-22-2024/usda-announces-investments-tribal-communities-acequias-finalizes>.