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Dear Peter Rhee,

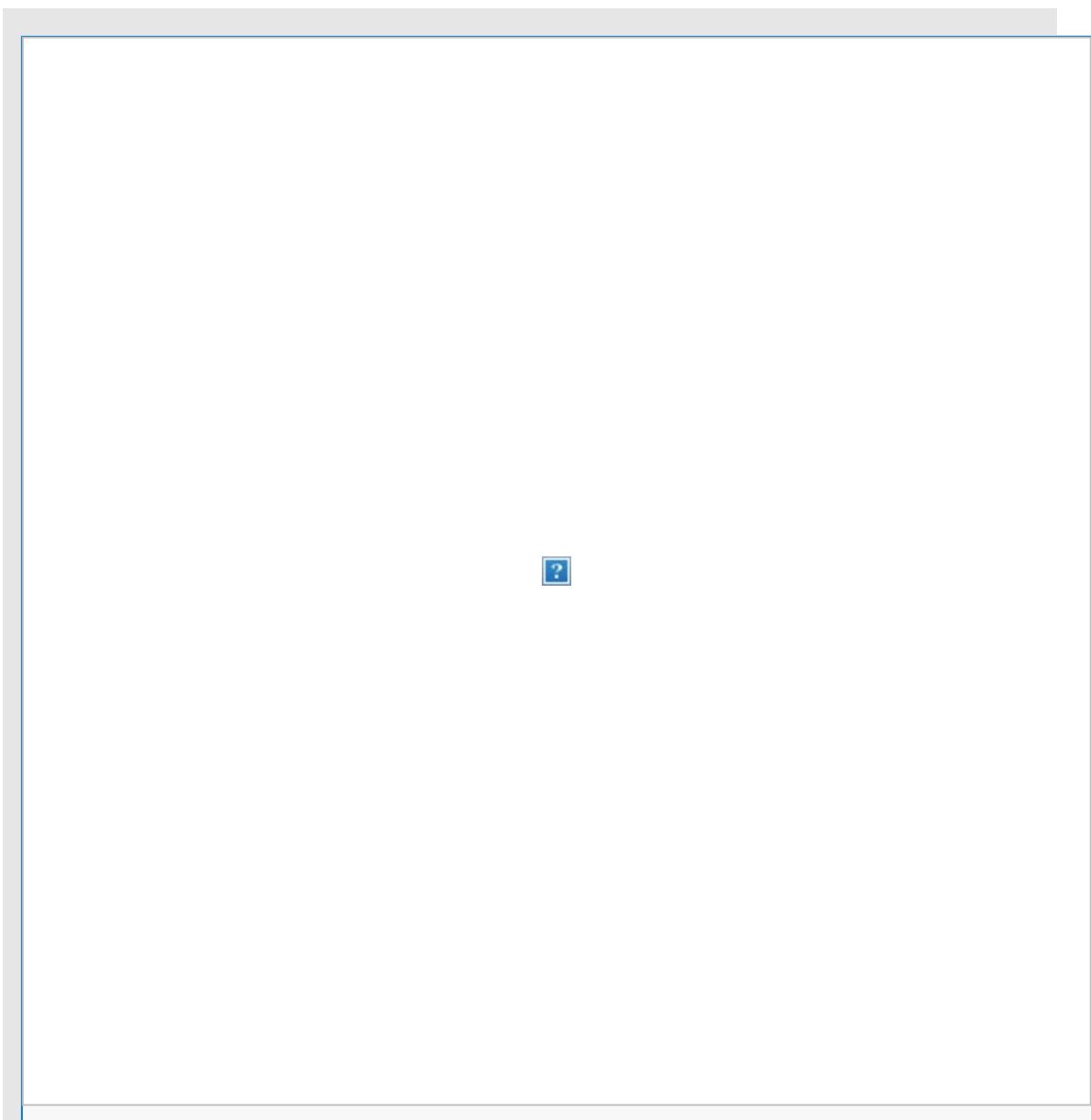
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**Subject:** USDA Office of Tribal Relations News

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## USDA's Office of Tribal Relations Newsletter

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*Hihanni waste*, greetings.

Meet our team!

It has been a busy year for hiring at the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Office of Tribal Relations (OTR). In the past, most of the positions at OTR had been filled by temporary contracts or rotations, which left OTR with high turnover rates and Indian Country with inconsistent points of contact and loss of institutional knowledge.

The Office of Tribal Relations leads the intergovernmental role for the Department with Tribes and serves as a single point of contact for Tribal issues. Our team works to ensure that relevant programs and policies are efficient, easy to understand, accessible, and developed in consultation with the American Indians and Alaska Native Tribes.

Under this Administration, we made it a priority to bring on an amazing team of permanent staff to ensure Indian Country was getting the service and prioritization it deserved. The first step was moving the Office directly under the Secretary of Agriculture, to elevate our nation-to-nation relationship and general trust responsibility to the appropriate level. We then brought the Tribal College Program under OTR, to ensure long term stabilization and support for Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and students and respect for the governmental ownership of TCUs.

Next, we focused on ensuring all our teammates were permanent career staff who had the expertise to fully understand and represent Indian Country's priorities. To accomplish this, OTR worked closely with USDA's central Human Resources office to issue a hiring advisory regarding any USDA position which is Tribal-facing or serving Indian Country. The advisory outlines very detailed steps, including ensuring each such position specifically requires the necessary specialized skills.

And finally, we sought and found someone with deep knowledge and expertise in navigating USDA, federal budgets, federal bureaucracy, etc. to really help OTR, Tribes, and Tribal producers navigate the complexities of such a large federal Department as USDA. We found that expert in our new Deputy Director Besty Rakola! Please join us in welcoming her to the team.

Also join us in congratulating our new Deputy Director of the Tribal College Program, Lisa Yellow Lugar. Deputy Director Yellow Lugar joins us from the Standing Rock Reservation. Together, Tribal College Program Director Lawrence Shorty and Deputy Director Yellow Lugar are in the process of hiring a new TCU outreach team. The policy advisor team is also in the process of selecting a policy advisor for our Tribal farming and ranching portfolio. We look forward to announcing those new teammates in the coming months.



[Heather Dawn Thompson](#) (*Cheyenne River Sioux*) 202-205-2249

**Director, Office of Tribal Relations**

Thompson is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, a Harvard Law School graduate, and an expert in American Indian law, Tribal sovereignty, and rural Tribal economic development. Most recently, Thompson served as a member of the American Indian Law Practice Group at Greenberg Traurig, where she worked on federal Indian law and Tribal agriculture. Thompson has a long record of public service,

beginning as a Presidential Management Fellow at the Department of Justice. Since then, Thompson has served as a law clerk with the Attorney General's Office for the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, as Counsel and Policy Advisor to the United States Senate, and as an Assistant U.S. Attorney for South Dakota's Indian Country Section, where she prosecuted cases involving violence against women and children. In addition, she has served as the director of government affairs for the National Congress of American Indians, President of the South Dakota Indian Country Bar Association, and president of the National Native American Bar Association. Thompson holds a Juris Doctor cum laude from Harvard Law School, as well as a master's degree in public policy from the University of Florida, and a bachelor's degree in international studies from Carnegie Mellon University.



**[Betsy Rakola](#)**

**Deputy Director, Office of Tribal Relations** 202-205-2249

Prior to joining USDA's Office of Tribal Relations, Betsy Rakola was the second in command at the Agricultural Marketing Service's Transportation and Marketing Program, where she managed budgets sometimes in excess of \$1 billion. Betsy also led the development of the Indigenous Animals Meat Processing and Harvesting Grant Program, as well as the Tribal Seafood Processors Pandemic Relief Grant Program. Betsy also worked for the USDA's National Organic Program for 11 years. Betsy holds a master's degree in agriculture and environmental policy from the Tufts University and a bachelor's degree in international relations from Boston University. A native of Minnesota, she lives in Maryland with her husband and two very energetic young boys.

**Tribal Policy Advisor Team**



**[Josiah Griffin](#)** (*Native Hawaiian/Samoan*) 202-689-4861

**Policy Advisor, Tribal Economic Development and Food Systems**

Through this role, Josiah Griffin coordinates to fulfill USDA's general trust and treaty responsibility across economic development, community infrastructure, and food systems-related programming. He also coordinates the Tribal Advisory Committee. Prior to joining the Office of Tribal Relations, Griffin served in the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, collaborating with Tribal nations in considering the policy, economic, and food safety implications on developing agri-food businesses. He also served as trustee liaison to the Native American Agriculture Fund, the largest philanthropic body dedicated to perpetuating Native agriculture, through its first year in operations. Griffin earned a master's degree in business administration, focusing on supply chain and logistics management, from the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas and a bachelor's degree in agricultural leadership and development from Texas A&M University.



**[Jeffrey Harris](#)**, 202-768-0812

**Policy Advisor, Tribal Consultation and Indigenous Food Sovereignty**

Prior to joining USDA, Jeffrey Harris worked at the Library of Congress as Assistant General Counsel, where he served as an analyst for the organization. Jeff has been instrumental in launching the USDA Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative and working with Tribal Nations, Tribal producers, and USDA programs to ensure Indigenous foods are better incorporated. He received a Juris Doctor from George Mason University and a bachelor's degree in

journalism and public policy from James Madison University, where he graduated cum laude with distinction.



**[Taylor Schad](#)** (*Cheyenne River Sioux*), 202-875-9236  
**Policy Advisor, Forest Service, Treaties, and Natural Resources**

Taylor provides policy coordination across USDA's Forest Service, natural resources, treaties and Indigenous knowledge-related programming. Taylor also plays a key role in the Tribal Treaties Database a collaboration with USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). Taylor earned a Juris Doctor from the University of Colorado Law School with certificates in American Indian law; energy, environmental and natural resources law and policy; and international law; and a bachelor's degree from Stanford University in Native American studies with honors in education.



**[Jim Wabindato](#)**, (*Little River Band of Ottawa*), 202-805-2208  
**Special Policy Advisor, Tribal Agricultural Lands**

In this role, Jim Wabindato is responsible for fulfilling USDA's general trust and treaty responsibilities in farm production and conservation programming. Specifically, he is responsible for helping streamline Tribal agricultural land policies between USDA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Prior to joining the OTR team, Wabindato worked on Tribal landowner education and related programming for the Indian Land Tenure Foundation; as a site manager with the Indian Land Consolidation Office; a realty specialist and grant writer with the Bad River Band of Chippewa; as well as economic director and casino board member for Little River. Wabindato earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Michigan.

### **USDA Tribal College Program Team**



**[Lawrence Shorty](#)** (*Navajo/Mississippi Choctaw*), 202-870-8035  
**Director, Tribal College Program**

Lawrence Shorty is a descendent of some of the first agriculturalists in what would become the states of Arizona, Mississippi, and New Mexico. His ancestors and family were dry land and irrigation farmers, sheep, goat, and cattle herders, and tobacco farmers. His "Carolina Grandparents" were tobacco allotment holders in Person County and in Halifax County, Virginia. Lawrence co-founded the Traditional Tobacco Seed Bank and Education Program at the University of New Mexico. He helped to pioneer a Native American resurgence in tobacco seed collection, seed sharing, and ceremonial tobacco growing. His multidisciplinary and hands-on approach to Native tobacco growing intersects with substance abuse prevention, public health, Indigenous knowledge, and agriculture, all areas in which he has published. His work has been featured in Maori, New Zealand, Canadian, and World Health Organization sponsored projects. Lawrence has received fellowships from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the United States Department of Agriculture. Lawrence is the Director of the Tribal College Program in the USDA Office of Tribal Relations.

**[Lisa Yellow Luger](#)** (*Standing Rock Sioux*), 202-845-5646  
**Deputy Director, Tribal College Program**



Based on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, Lisa Yellow Luger works to ensure that [Tribal colleges and universities](#) designated as land-grant institutions through the Equity in Educational Land-Grant Status Act of 1994 have equitable access to USDA agency programs, services, and resources. Prior to joining USDA, she worked as the assistant to the vice president of Sitting Bull College, and also worked extensively with Tribes in North Dakota, South

Dakota and Kansas. These positions allowed her to gain direct experience and understanding working with Tribes, Tribal communities, and Native youth. Yellow Luger holds a master's in legal studies, Indigenous people's law from the University of Oklahoma and a bachelor's degree in business from the University of Mary. Outside of her work with USDA, she and her husband ranch with her in-law's fourth generation cow-calf pair operation.

### Administrative Team



[Elena Krajeski](#), 771-216-2277  
**Administrative Officer**

Elena Krajeski is the administrative officer for USDA's Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). She is responsible a wide range of logistical and operational management tasks, policies, programs, and objectives for OTR. Elena transferred to USDA from the Smithsonian Institution where she had worked as an administrative specialist for five years. Prior to federal service, she was a Peace Corps volunteer working in the community and economic development sector. She

has more than five years of international diplomatic experience and holds a bachelor's degree in environmental and natural resource economics from the University of Rhode Island. Outside of her professional life, Elena enjoys crafting, rock climbing, and gardening in the summer.



[Ariel Williams](#) (*Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Dakota Sioux*)  
202-934-8337  
**Administrative Assistant**

Based on the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate (SWO) reservation, Ariel is responsible for providing administrative support to the OTR policy team and Tribal College Program. Prior to joining OTR, she was the agricultural leasing specialist for the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Realty program. She has prior experience working as a legal secretary and as a corporate administrative assistant and office manager. Ariel is an honorably discharged Navy

Veteran, while she was in the Navy, she worked as a work center supervisor. Ariel holds an associate's degree in professional legal studies.

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*Lila wopila* (much thanks), for your guidance, advocacy, and hard work!

Heather Dawn Thompson (*Cheyenne River Sioux*)  
Director, USDA Office of Tribal Relations



Department of Agriculture | 1400 Independence Ave., S.W., Washington, DC 20250

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