



September 4, 2024

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chairwoman Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
United States Senate
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

RE: USDA's Mismanagement of Tribal Food Programs Demonstrate the Importance of Expanded Self-Determination and Self-Governance Authority

On behalf of the Self-Governance Communication and Education Tribal Consortium (SGCETC), I write to stress the critical need for Tribal governments to have local control over the food distribution programs serving their citizens and communities. USDA's mismanagement of the Food Distribution Program for Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) has led to severe food shortages for many Tribal governments across the country, as widely reported in the media.¹

Food security is fundamental to the well-being of Tribal communities, where access to traditional, locally sourced, healthy, and culturally appropriate foods is essential for preserving cultural heritage and promoting health. Some members of Congress have urged USDA to correct this error and implement safeguards to prevent future crises. It's important for Congress to recognize that expanded Self-Determination and Self-Governance authority is an available solution. Nearly 50 years of experience with Self-Determination and Self-Governance authority demonstrates that Tribal governments can administer federal programs more effectively and efficiently than the federal government.

In 2018, Congress authorized USDA to establish the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project, granting participating Tribal nations more control over their food distribution programs. Although limited in scope and participation, the project has been highly successful. "Spirit Lake Nation has been participating in the '638 self-determination demonstration project' since October 1, 2023, and we have had tremendous success in providing healthier options like Tribal-grown bison and an enhanced variety of products," said Mary Green Trottier, Spirit Lake Nation's Director of FDPIR and CSFP, in a recent news release from the Native Farm Bill Coalition. "The FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project gives tribes like Oneida Nation the authority to select local, indigenous vendors for our food distribution program," said Tehassi Hill, Chairman of the Oneida Nation. "The

¹See, for example, "Tribal food assistance program in shambles after USDA warehouse consolidation" (Investigate Midwest); "USDA faces criticism over tribal, seniors food assistance crisis" (Politico Pro); "Congress intensifies scrutiny over USDA's handling of tribal food distribution programs" (Tribal Business News); "USDA chief admits 'mistakes' as food shortages hit tribal populations, low-income seniors" (Politico); "Tribal communities left without staple foods; legislators demand solutions" (North Dakota Monitor).



Self-Governance Communication & Education Tribal Consortium

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project has allowed us to build regional Tribal food systems to feed our people. Oneida Nation supplies our FDPIR program with beef and bison from our own farms and secures wild rice and fish from other Tribal producers in our region.”

The benefits of Self-Determination and Self-Governance authority may be best demonstrated when comparing federal administration to Tribal administration. Currently, many Tribal communities that rely on USDA to procure food for their distribution programs are facing critical shortages and uncertainty. In contrast, tribally administered programs authorized under the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project are thriving. “The current national food distribution inventory crisis underscores the effectiveness of sourcing foods locally or regionally. The Chickasaw Nation has not experienced inventory issues with foods procured locally through the 638 Self-Determination Demonstration Project,” said Bill Anoatubby, Governor of the Chickasaw Nation. “Through the FDPIR Self-Determination Demonstration Project, Oneida Nation has reduced the impacts of USDA food supply disruptions on our FDPIR program,” added Chairman Hill. “We have met our clients’ needs while providing fresh, local products of higher quality. A permanent expansion of FDPIR Self-Governance authority in the next Farm Bill would give tribes even more flexibility to adapt and respond to food supply disruptions and keep our communities fed.”

For years, Tribal Nations have been working to reestablish complex food systems and economies. Tribal Nations are top producers of crops, cattle, and buffalo in some regions; they construct and operate meat processing facilities, run successful fish and shellfish hatcheries, and build regional food economies. USDA’s mismanagement of FDPIR and CSFP highlights the urgent need for Congress to expand Tribal Self-Determination and Self-Governance authority to programs that serve Tribal communities.

SGCETC urges you to support marker bills that expand and enhance Self-Determination and Self-Governance authority for FDPIR, CSFP, the Food Safety and Inspection Service, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Expanding and recognizing Tribes’ authority will ensure these programs are effective in meeting the needs of the communities they serve, while upholding the United States’ trust obligations and honoring the principles of Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

Sincerely,

W. Ron Allen, Tribal Chairman/CEO, Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe and
President, SGCETC Board of Directors