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CHEROKEE NATION™
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June 22, 2010

**Testimony of Norma Merriman,
Group Leader, Cherokee Nation Human Services
House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry
Hearing to Review the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations**

Chairman Baca, Ranking Member Fortenberry, members of the Committee, I bring the thanks of Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chad Smith for convening this hearing on a service program that is of vital importance to Cherokee people and Indian Country as a whole. My name is Norma Merriman and I am the Group Leader for Cherokee Nation Human Services. I am accompanied by Jerry Snell, Director of Family Assistance, and Bud Squirrel, Food Distribution Manager. The Cherokee Nation appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

OVERVIEW OF CHEROKEE NATION FOOD DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM

The Cherokee Nation Food Distribution Program consists of 52 staff members including store managers, clerks, warehouse workers, inventory and data personnel, nutritionists and truck drivers. The Cherokee Nation currently operates 5 food distribution centers (FDCs) at strategic locations throughout the Nation's 14 county jurisdiction. In addition to these strategic "hubs", the Nation also operates seven tailgate sites where food is delivered to the most remote communities on a monthly basis.

The Food Distribution Program currently serves approximately 10,000 participants every month and has been one of the largest, most successful FDPIR programs in Indian Country. The Cherokee Nation was the first FDPIR to implement the "grocery store" concept where clients are allowed to shop at their leisure in a retail environment. Our patrons enjoy the convenience of choosing their products like everybody else instead of receiving boxes of food from the back of a truck.

The Cherokee Nation currently has one additional FDC in planning that will be built and fully operational in 2011. The Nation also has a long-term plan to develop three more strategically located FDCs so that all clients in the 14-county jurisdiction are no more than thirty minutes away from a distribution center. This will eliminate the need for tailgate sites altogether.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROPOSED RULE CHANGES

The Cherokee Nation appreciates the opportunity to comment on the following proposed rule changes governing the FDPIR. I would like to preface our comments by generally expressing our support for streamlining the regulations governing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the FDPIR. In April 2009, USDA increased the SNAP benefits for their participants an average of twenty dollars per client by using funds provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Unfortunately, there was not a corresponding pro rata increase for FDPIR participants. The Cherokee Nation is enthused by this hearing and the

proposed rule changes as they present a great opportunity to improve parity of these two programs and allow greater access to nutrition assistance for Indian Country.

Proposition A: Excluding Household Funds Held in Education Savings Accounts from Consideration as a Resource

Education has always been a major priority to the Cherokee Nation. We have a vested interest in the education of our citizens as evidenced by the many scholars and leaders that adorn our history. The Nation is very supportive of this measure as it would encourage the higher education of our citizens and provide greater ability for those citizens in impoverished and needy communities to pursue greater levels of self-reliance.

Proposition B: Clarification Regarding the Resource Exclusion for Qualified Retirement Accounts

The Nation is supportive of provisions protecting the retirement accounts of our citizens and ensuring that those funds are not interpreted to be a detriment to their access to the FDPIR. In addition to improving access, allowing resource exclusion for properly setup and administered retirement accounts will undoubtedly encourage our citizens to save for retirement regardless of their financial status and participation in the FDPIR.

Proposition C: Clarifying the Application of SNAP Net Income Standards to FDPIR

The Nation supports equitable consideration for both SNAP and FDPIR, and is supportive of the provision to consider net income, as opposed to gross income, as the qualifying standard to participate in the FDPIR. The Nation appreciates this clarification as it will provide consideration for pre-tax deductions from salaries and reduce confusion around standards of enrollment in the program. Similar to proposition B, this proposal will increase the willingness of our citizens to establish deductions in their payroll to provide for their retirement.

Proposition D: Excluding Combat Pay from Income

Aligning FDPIR and SNAP provisions regarding combat pay is simply a necessity. Some of our Cherokee service members come from impoverished communities and while they are compensated for their service overseas; their pay is simply not on par with the risks they face during deployment. The Cherokee Nation appreciates this consideration for military personnel as it will help to provide assistance to military families while their loved ones serve abroad.

Proposition E.: Amending the Dependent Care Deduction

Allowing participants to claim the full cost of their dependent care deductions would be a welcome benefit. The nature and intent of the FDPIR and the Cherokee Nation Food Distribution Program is primarily focused on the care and protection of Indian families. Naturally there is a strong emphasis on nutrition and healthy rearing of our Indian children. Removing regulatory language focused on dependent care would be a welcome adjustment to the current policy and this provision would inevitably improve the health and well-being of many of our Nation's children.

Mr. Chairman, once again I thank you for convening this hearing and allowing the Cherokee Nation to express comment on a highly successful program that helps to improve the lives of Indian people on a daily basis. The Cherokee Nation is committed to FDPIR and appreciates

your interest and enthusiasm for the program. We are dedicated to elevating our indigent and impoverished communities so that they may adequately pursue our declaration of designed purpose to become a happy, healthy Nation through our initiatives in jobs, language and community. The FDPIR is an essential element to improving the wellness of our most needy population and we appreciate your regard for the importance of this issue.

This concludes my testimony. Should you require further information on any of the Cherokee Nation's programs and services, I invite you to contact the Cherokee Nation Washington Office, 202-393-7007.

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