



Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

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TESTIMONY OF JERRY TONUBBEE

Director – Food Distribution

CHOCTAW NATION OF OKLAHOMA

Before the House Committee on Agriculture, Subcommittee on Nutrition

The Next Farm Bill: Food Distribution Programs

March 21, 2017

Mr. Chairman. Members of the Subcommittee. Halito; sv hohchifot Jerry Tonubbee. Oklahoma Chahta Okla ya Illimpa Ahopela I nushkoboka sia. Himak nittak a vla li kvv sv na yukpa.

Hello. My name is Jerry Tonubbee. I am the Food Distribution Director for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. It is my pleasure to be here today.

I oversee Choctaw Nation's implementation of the USDA's Indian Reservation Food Distribution Program. Nationwide, this program serves approximately 93,000 Native Americans each month. In Choctaw Nation alone, we serve close to 6,000 Native Americans monthly, including our own tribal citizens and other Indians who reside in our area. This program serves our neediest families, providing close to \$300,000 worth of food each month.

I am honored to serve my Choctaw Nation in this way. I am very familiar with the struggles many of our low income families go through while trying to put food on the table. My family went through difficult times while I was growing up, and the USDA food commodity program, as it was called at the time, was very important for my family and me as we all worked to put food on the table. If not for this program, my family would have had to rely on relatives for food, or maybe even go hungry. From my own personal experience, I have come to have a deep respect for programs like this that provide real, practical and vital help to people in need. This program is very personal to me, and I am passionate about serving my fellow tribal citizens who now need these services. My last name, Tonubbee, is a Choctaw warrior name. This, combined with my other family name of Pistubbee, both instill in me a strong heritage of fighting for Choctaw people. It's my honor to carry on that family legacy and standing up for our people who need help the most.

On behalf of my Chief, the Honorable Gary Batton, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the achievements of the Choctaw Nation Food Distribution Program, our challenges, and recommendations on how to ensure improvements in the implementation of this program to feed tribal members around the country through the next Farm Bill.

FDPIR and the Choctaw Nation

Choctaw Nation is proud to be a partner with the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service to administer the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

In administering FDPIR, the Choctaw Nation serves all eligible tribal members throughout our treaty territory-over 11,000 square miles in southeastern Oklahoma. This is one of the largest, most rural, and highest need tribal areas in the country. Because of this, the Choctaw Nation was designated as the first tribal Promise Zone in January 2014. At the time of our application, all of the 10.5 counties located within the Choctaw Nation fell into the USDA's extremely high poverty designation. A large portion of this area is also classified as a food desert by the USDA. No matter how we are measured, our statistics on poverty, unemployment, educational attainment, health, and nutrition are among the worst in America. However, through the leadership and record success of Choctaw Nation, we are using the Promise Zone designation to improve our situation by establishing strong partnerships with federal, state, and local governments, community leaders, and non-profits. FDPIR is one program that helps to combat our awful statistics and is crucial to our continued success as a Promise Zone.

FDPIR is intended to be a supplemental program, but for far too many of our tribal members, it is their primary source of food. When compared to other federal feeding programs, FDPIR is a healthier choice for our people. Food supplies our citizens receive monthly adhere to strict nutritional guidelines. The food has low sodium and low fat content, and little to no sugar. Things like cakes, pies, and sodas are not available through FDPIR. Our participants receive healthy ingredients each month like fresh fruit and vegetables, milk, beans, lean meats, and other items that can be prepared into full, nutritional meals.

Choctaw Nation has five locations around the Choctaw Nation for food distribution. The Choctaw Nation has used tribal dollars to build these facilities, in order to provide our citizens a well-rounded shopping and learning experience as they get their family's food supplies for the month. Our five stores are top-notch facilities and provide a real grocery store experience for our citizens. There are also kitchen facilities and cooking classes offered on a regular basis to help teach our citizens how to prepare nutritional meals. Before the Choctaw Nation built these stores, food was shipped to designated locations around Choctaw Nation and program participants were handed their food from the back of a truck. We believe our citizens deserve a more dignified way of obtaining food, and that's why we have invested millions of tribal dollars to help mold this program into a well-rounded experience for our citizens.

Food and Nutrition Recommendations for the next Farm Bill

The Choctaw Nation works diligently to administer FDPIR and serve thousands of tribal citizens each month. However, there are challenges we and other tribes face in administering this program. We offer for your consideration the following recommendations that would make food distribution more streamlined and efficient in serving our tribal citizens. We also offer a recommendation on how tribal nations should be given access to administer other federal feeding programs to meet nutritional needs in Indian Country.

1. Urban Place Limitation

The USDA bars us from providing FDPIR to residents of any ‘urban place’, which USDA defines as any city or town with a population over 10,000. By and large, Choctaw Nation is very rural. However, we have some bustling communities that exceed the 10,000 population threshold. We have to apply for a waiver from USDA to serve our tribal members in each of these communities. We see this as an unnecessary burden that delays service to some of our neediest citizens. This limitation also excludes our tribal citizens from receiving services who live outside our treaty territory. Choctaws live in every single state in the U.S., and we also have a large population of Choctaws who live in Oklahoma, but outside our treaty territory. So the large number of our tribal citizens who live in and around Tulsa or Oklahoma City and need food assistance cannot access FDPIR. They may be eligible to access other federal programs, but programs like SNAP don’t have the same nutritional focus as FDPIR. Removing the urban place limitation from FDPIR would enable Choctaw Nation to better serve those of our citizens who reside in slightly larger communities, as well as tribal members who live in and around Tulsa or Oklahoma City for whom the Choctaw Nation provides other tribal services.

The Choctaw Nation has received broad support for this request from other tribal nations around the country. In 2016, Choctaw Nation passed a resolution with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), and it passed unanimously. NCAI is the largest and oldest group of its kind representing Indian Country and its interests. (See addendum) The urban place limitation is a barrier to serving our citizens, even in relatively small communities. Thank you for considering our request that you eliminate this barrier through the next Farm Bill.

2. Carry over and funding certainty

FDPIR funding can be uncertain and the amounts can change from year to year. This requires us to seek Choctaw Nation Tribal Council approval for a tribal dollar match often before we know what the federal funding amount will be. We ask you to consider a carry-over provision for FDPIR funding in the next Farm Bill that would allow us to carry forward a certain percentage of our annual FDPIR amount so we can always be good stewards of the funds we are given. This would better enable us to serve our tribal citizens in a continuous and consistent manner that effectively manages both tribal and federal funds. Additionally it would be helpful if we could get annual federal FDPIR budgets approved in a little more timely fashion. We are often halfway through the fiscal year before we know the final approved budget. A carry-over process would help ease that uncertainty, and forward funding a year ahead of expenditures would greatly assist us in administering FDPIR.

3. The Emergency Food Assistance Program and tribes

Providing nutritious food to our tribal citizens is of utmost importance to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. We are looking beyond FDPIR to see how else we can serve our people, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) would be a good fit for the Choctaw Nation. However, TEFAP does not currently allow for tribal administration of the program. Under current rules, the Choctaw Nation would have to apply to the State of Oklahoma in order

to become an eligible recipient agency. This would subordinate the Choctaw Nation to the State, which would create an unacceptable, impractical and complicated relationship. The Choctaw Nation has continually demonstrated our programmatic capacity and our commitment to a Tribe-federal partnership through our administration of FDPIR. We ask this Subcommittee to consider amending and expanding TEFAP to allow for tribal administration, on par with states. The previous Farm Bill called for USDA-FNS to examine which federal feeding programs, other than FDPIR, would be a good fit for tribal administration. However, when this study was done, it focused on programs like SNAP to the exclusion of TEFAP and other programs. We know TEFAP is a much better fit for tribal communities due to its nutritional guidelines. We recommend that the Congress authorize tribal administration of TEFAP in the next Farm Bill.

As you prepare the next Farm Bill, your Subcommittee has the unique opportunity to further support and improve how Indian Country's nutritional needs are met. The Choctaw Nation is honored by this opportunity to testify before you, and we appreciate your time. We look forward to engaging with you as you develop the next Farm Bill.

Yakoke!

Addendum



Groundbreaking ceremony on the new Choctaw Nation Food Distribution Center in Broken Bow.



Tribal citizen shopping at a Choctaw Nation Food Distribution Center.



Demonstration and teaching kitchen at a Choctaw Nation Food Distribution Center.



NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

The National Congress of American Indians Resolution #SPO-16-022

TITLE: Remove the “Urban Place” Limitation in USDA’s Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

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NCAI HEADQUARTERS

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WHEREAS, we, the members of the National Congress of American Indians of the United States, invoking the divine blessing of the Creator upon our efforts and purposes, in order to preserve for ourselves and our descendants the inherent sovereign rights of our Indian nations, rights secured under Indian treaties and agreements with the United States, and all other rights and benefits to which we are entitled under the laws and Constitution of the United States, to enlighten the public toward a better understanding of the Indian people, to preserve Indian cultural values, and otherwise promote the health, safety and welfare of the Indian people, do hereby establish and submit the following resolution; and

WHEREAS, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) was established in 1944 and is the oldest and largest national organization of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments; and

WHEREAS, The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) program classifies an "Urban Place" as a town or a city with a population of 10,000 or more people; and

WHEREAS, tribal citizens who reside in urban areas can only be served in this program through a waiver process; and

WHEREAS, tribal citizens living in slightly larger communities and the metropolitan areas are excluded from receiving nutritious food through the FDPIR program due to the “urban place” definition; and

WHEREAS, tribal communities are growing and expanding due to increased economic development to include more tribal citizens from many tribal nations; and that there are thousands of tribal citizens who live in urban areas who are excluded from receiving nutritious and culturally relevant food supplies from the FDPIR program;

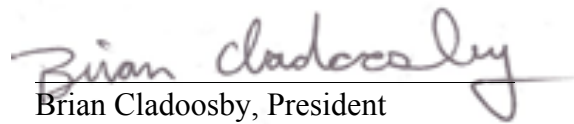
WHEREAS, the FDPIR, which is administered by over 270 tribes, is a vital program which provides feeding program services and food packages for the most food insecure tribal citizens and should be allowed to reach all tribal citizens in need.

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that NCAI asks the U.S. Department of Agriculture to remove the “Urban Place” definition and limitation to a population of 10,000 people for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, allowing tribal nations and the USDA to work collaboratively to serve even more tribal citizens who need nutritious food, regardless of where they live.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that this resolution shall be the policy of NCAI until it is withdrawn or modified by subsequent resolution.

CERTIFICATION

The foregoing resolution was adopted by the General Assembly at the 2016 Midyear Session of the National Congress of American Indians, held at the Spokane Convention Center, June 27 to June 30, 2016, with a quorum present.


Brian Cladoosby, President

ATTEST:


Aaron Payment, Recording Secretary