



April 9, 2024

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Re: USDA Should Support the Expansion of Pub.L. 93-638 Authority Throughout the Agency

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

On behalf of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a leading public health and consumer advocacy organization, we urge you to express to the House and Senate Agriculture Committees your public support for the expansion of 638 Indian Self-Determination contracting and Tribal Self-Governance compacting throughout the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), thereby allowing Tribal communities to have greater control over resources distributed by federal programs. This would include those relating to food and nutrition assistance, giving Tribal authorities opportunities to provide their communities with greater access to food that is both healthy and culturally important.

CSPI is a non-profit consumer education and advocacy organization that has worked since 1971 to improve the public's health through better nutrition and food safety. CSPI helped to lead efforts to win passage of the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, the Food Safety Modernization Act, chain restaurant menu labeling, and the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act. CSPI also publishes Nutrition Action (NA) and is supported by the subscribers to NA, individual donors, and foundation grants. CSPI is an independent organization that does not accept any corporate donations.

Studies have shown that American Indian^a people experience food insecurity at higher rates compared to other people in the U.S.¹ while also paying higher prices for food than the average U.S. consumer.² American Indian people also have elevated levels of chronic diseases that are exacerbated by poor diets, such as diabetes, compared to others in the U.S.³ Together, these findings emphasize the need to increase both food security and nutrition security in Native communities, while also dismantling the systemic inequities that cause and perpetuate these challenges.

The USDA defines nutrition security as “consistent access, availability, and affordability of foods and beverages that promote well-being, prevent disease, and, if needed, treat disease, particularly among racial/ethnic minority populations, lower income populations, and rural and remote populations including Tribal communities and Insular areas.”⁴ Because of USDA's prioritization of Tribal communities, expanding 638 authority to promote food sovereignty in

^a American Indian is the terminology used in the survey data; however, we acknowledge that this designation may not fully encompass the identities of all individuals in Native, Indigenous, and Tribal communities.

Indian country is a logical step forward. Native food sovereignty entails access to healthy, and culturally appropriate food, sustainable food production, and protecting traditional agricultural practices.⁵ Congressmembers have introduced several marker bills expanding 638 to various USDA programs, including:

- S. 2489, FDPIR Tribal Food Sovereignty Act
- S. 2912/H.R. 5790, SNAP Tribal Food Sovereignty Act of 2023

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) has been shown to support food security⁶ and intake of Tribally-procured foods.⁷ In addition, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a powerful food safety net program that lifts families out of poverty and allows flexibility in meeting people's food needs, such as allowing shoppers to choose their own foods and shop at a wide range of retailers. Expansion of 638 authority would facilitate full Tribal authority of FDPIR and SNAP, enabling Tribal Nations to offer the programs in a way that best meets both the cultural and nutritional needs of their communities. USDA should encourage Tribal communities to develop and implement their own nutrition approaches that best serve both their health needs and cultural practices.

Thank you for your dedication to improving the delivery of USDA services for Indian Country. Please contact Cassie Harrison-Ramos at cramos@cspinet.org or 202-777-8375 with any questions or requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

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Peter Lurie, MD, MPH
President and Executive Director

cc House Agriculture Committee, Senate Agriculture Committee, House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs, Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

¹ Nikolaus *et al.* Food Insecurity among American Indian and Alaska Native People: A Scoping Review to Inform Future Research and Policy Needs. *Adv Nutr.* 2022 Oct 2;13(5):1566-1583.

² First Nations Development Institute. Indian Country Food Price Index: Exploring Variation in Food Pricing Across Native Communities – A Working Paper. 2016. https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/publication-attachments/Indian_Country_Food_Price_Index_6-30-2016_FINAL%20FIXED.pdf. Accessed April 3, 2024.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Diabetes and American Indians/Alaska Natives. <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/diabetes-and-american-indiansalaska-natives>. Accessed April 3, 2024.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. USDA Actions of Nutrition Security. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-actions-nutrition-security.pdf>. Accessed April 3, 2024.

⁵ First Nations Development Institute. Perspectives on Native Food Sovereignty & Health Equity. <https://www.firstnations.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Perspectives-on-Native-Food-Sovereignty-04April2023.pdf>. Accessed April 3, 2024.

⁶ Mucioki *et al.* Thinking inside and outside the box: local and national considerations of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). *J Rural Stud.* 57 (2018) 88-98.

⁷ Parker *et al.* Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative. Gaining Ground: A Report on the 2018 Farm Bill Successes for Indian Country and Opportunities for 2023. https://www.nativefarmbill.com/files/ugd/8b3589_763e8879ac2842c0baa45c586ddfd83a.pdf. Accessed April 3, 2024.