

**The Department of Interior (DOI) Listening Session on Tribal Relocation, Managed Retreat Protect-in-place Issues  
in the Lower 48**

**October 28, 2021, 2:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET <sup>1</sup>**

***Eastern, Midwest, Great Plains, Eastern Oklahoma, and Southern Plains Region***

**Background**

[Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#) (EO 13985) directs agencies to conduct equity assessments of select programs to determine whether underserved communities face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities. Per EO 13985, underserved communities are defined as, “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life...such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” As part of implementing [EO 13985](#), the Department of the Interior (DOI) is assessing the equity of its programs related to three initial focus areas that support the agency's mission and have high potential for equity impact: (1) contracting, (2) recreational visitation, and (3) tribal discretionary grants. This session on Tribal Relocation, Managed Retreat, and Protect-in-place Issues in the Lower 48 is part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Resilience Program Funding, and this session's goal was to take a deeper dive to understand Tribe's needs regarding climate and how grant programs could support Tribes. DOI contracted with Kearns and West to conduct 15 virtual listening sessions where the public were invited to provide comments and feedback on the barriers that limit access, diversity, and equity as well as recommendations of actions the Department should take to reduce barriers.

On behalf of DOI, Kearns and West facilitated a listening session on Tribal Relocation, Managed Retreat Protect-in-place Issues in the Lower 48 on October 28, 2021, from 2:00 pm- 3:00 pm ET.

**Participant Data**

Ahead of this virtual session, registration totaled 150 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session with totals around 177.

Participants were invited to voluntarily use Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked where they were participating from, what their Tribal affiliation is, what impacts have they experienced that may lead to relocation, managed retreat or protect-in-place activities, types of infrastructure at risk, and a scale of responses regarding action needed to be taken., training that may be required, if they have used or are aware of training, and finally, have they begun to develop or outline a plan for relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place planning.

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting summary was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior by Kearns & West, Inc. (K&W) pursuant to an existing IDIQ contract.

Participants were located across a variety of geographies with large populations in the states of New Mexico, Washington, New York, Washington DC, Colorado, California Oregon, and Maryland. In terms of Tribal affiliations, participants were affiliated with Seneca and Navajo Tribes.<sup>2</sup>

Impacts experienced leading to relocation, managed retreat, or protection-in-place activities include toxins, drought, sea-level rise, wildfire smoke, water access, major storms, and flooding. Types of sites and infrastructure at risk include homes, cultural sites, wells, buildings, and natural resources. Participants mentioned that impacts to protecting cultural resources and structures are most important to protect and/or mitigate.

Tribal expertise or training needed to plan for community relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place activities include legal assistance, data analytics, scientific knowledge, and grant writing. Additionally, participants raised that those who work with Tribes and federal organizations need cultural competency training. When asked about previous experience and or knowledge of community relocation, managed retreat, or protect in place training, most participants responded that they were aware of trainings; however, participants did not provide specific feedback around these trainings.

When asked if participants have begun to develop or outline a plan for relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place planning, about 80% of participants responded no; however, 20% of participants did respond that they had begun to develop a specific plan for relocation, managed retreat, or protect in place.

### Agenda Overview

The purpose of this listening session was to begin a conversation with Tribal nations around the Administrations' priorities of climate change, equity, accessibility, and environmental justice. This listening session hoped to provide an opportunity for sharing information, discussing climate adaptation and mitigation priorities, and learning about perceived barriers to action. Based on the goals of the session, Kearns & West with the assistance of Bureau of Indian Affairs, developed two one-hour agendas to address the following questions:

- Is your Tribe dealing with more frequent and severe climate change impacts (e.g., flooding, erosion, sea level rise, etc.) that are likely to require partial or complete infrastructure relocation?
- If so, what are the resources (financial, technical, etc.) needed to assist the process? What are the barriers?

Miro, an interactive, collaborate virtual whiteboard was used to capture participants' responses to developed facilitation questions. Prior to the session, participants were sent a session reminder email with instructions on how to use Miro, which included a PDF of Miro Tips and a YouTube video tutorial. Sara Omar, Kearns & West, provided an additional demonstration of the Miro board, with instructions for those uncomfortable with the technology to express their ideas verbally or by using the chat function.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, led participants through a series of discussions. Participants were divided into four breakout rooms with the goal of conducting discussions through a Miro board activity, the chat function, or participants' verbal remarks. Each section introduced the topic matter with a question on the

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<sup>2</sup> Due to limited participation in polling, these were the only Tribal representatives recorded in this session; however, there were many participants that identified as Tribal staff and/or allies.

Miro board. Each discussion segment concluded with a summarization of themes, and its relationship to the larger session's goals.

In addition to guided facilitation of Miro activities and reflection, the listening session opened with remarks from Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management, and Budget Rachael Taylor and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor recognized Tribal nations and their relationship to climate change impacts, as well as thanking those who joined the call today. Assistant Secretary Newland stressed that Tribal nations are at the forefront of the climate crisis, and adaptation and mitigation strategies are of great importance to the Department, and to the federal government. Both Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Taylor and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Newland stressed that this session would provide information on how to prioritize resources to strengthen Tribal sovereignty around issues of climate change.

### Themes and Concepts

Four thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) Tribal community relocation, (2) climate change impacts, (3) community relocation access, and (4) recommendations. A summary of each conversation is included below.

#### *Tribal Community Relocation*

This section looked for participants to begin brainstorming answers to the following questions:

- What kind of Tribal expertise or training is needed to plan for community relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place activities, etc.?
- Are you aware or have used existing training and capacity building resources for those purposes?

Participants were encouraged to reflect on their current needs and understanding of programs that should or could be available. **Participants were asked questions through the Miro board Activity in their respective breakout rooms lending itself to the collective themes of experiencing extreme weather and impacts relating to water including sea-level rise, drought, and water rights.** Participants added suggestions of more staff to increase capacity to address these issues and create vulnerability assessments. These collective themes are illustrated in *Figure 1: Tribal Community Relocation Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A.

#### *Climate Change Impacts*

This section looked for participants to begin brainstorming answers to the following questions:

- What climate change impacts have you experienced that may lead to relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place activities?
- What sectors do your relocation activities affect? (e.g., water quality and water resources, subsistence, wildfire/flooding/sea-level rise (SLR) reduction risk, outdated at-risk infrastructure, nature-based solutions, renewable, "build-back-better" resilience updates/re-models, etc.)

Participants were encouraged to reflect on current climate change impacts. **Participants were asked these questions through the Miro board Activity in their respective breakout rooms lending itself to the collective themes of drought relocation, air quality, and extreme weather events impacts, resulting in loss of land, culture, and influx of invasive species.** These collective themes are illustrated in *Figure 2: Climate Change Impacts Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A.

### *Community Relocation Access*

This section looked for participants to begin brainstorming answers to the following questions:

- What parts of the relocation/managed retreat, etc. process is easily funded through available sources, and what parts of the process are more difficult to access funding for?
  - What programs or funded sources have helped you in this work?
- Though a relocation plan or strategy will be different for each Tribal community, what types of guidelines or frameworks might be helpful to Tribal planners working on this issue? (e.g., Emergency Mgmt., Hazard Mitigation, Managed Retreat Plan, etc.)

Participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences with community relocation access.

**Participants were asked these questions through the Miro board Activity in their respective breakout rooms lending itself to the collective themes of concern around the pains of relocation and removal of homelands once again.** Participants shared that the use of grant funding does not always match or sustain the needs of Tribal communities in the long-term. These collective themes are illustrated in *Figure 3: Community Relocation Access Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A.

Participant discussion in **Breakout Room One** contained members working for government affiliations with no Tribal affiliations. A few members shared reflections on climate change, specifically drought.

Participant discussion in **Breakout Room Two** included themes of sensitivity and the impact relocation has on Tribal nations historically. The cultural impacts of relocation are just as important as financial and physical wellbeing.

Participant discussion in **Breakout Room Three** included themes of the ecological impacts happening in their communities in addition to the loss of culture among Tribal nations. Participants mentioned the following impacts due to climate change: Increase wildfires; More severe flash floods, diminishing water supply reliability, failing ecosystems and flooding. These climate change events are impacting water quality/resources, causing subsistence and flooding, land loss, decrease in native species and wildlife harvesting changes.

Participant discussion in **Breakout Room Four** revolved around water rights within Tribal communities. Participants shared experiences with extreme flooding and erosion. Tribal communities try to purchase the land so they can have control and manage the land however the cost of implementation can be difficult for some.

### **Overarching Recommendations**

Participants throughout the session and in breakout rooms provided input and feedback to inform the Department. The key recommendations the Kearns and West Facilitation Team heard and would like to emphasize include:

- Continuing listening sessions with Tribal communities at the local level with active participation from DOI staff.
- Increasing sustainable and consistent funding and capacity meeting the needs of Tribal communities.
- Providing capacity building resources to empower Tribes to develop vulnerability assessments.
- Addressing Tribes' climate concerns, especially concerns around drought and rising sea level with trainings, grants, or technical expertise.

## Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI Listening Session on Tribal Relocation, Managed Retreat Protect-in-place Issues in the Lower 48. Miro boards from each breakout session have been consolidated into one Miro board per thematic discussion area. Participants preferred to discuss their recommendations, then record them on a Miro board. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.

What kind of Tribal expertise or training is needed to plan for community relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place activities, etc.?

Are you aware of or have you used existing training and capacity building resources for these purposes?

Anything else we should know?



Figure 1: Tribal Community Relocation Miro Board Screenshot

What climate change impacts have you experienced that may lead to relocation, managed retreat, or protect-in-place activities?

What sectors do your relocation activities affect? (e.g. water quality and water resources, subsistence, wildfire/flooding/slr reduction risk, outdated at-risk infrastructure, nature-based solutions, renewable, "build-back-better" resilience updates/re-models, etc.)

Anything else we should know?



Figure 2: Climate Change Impacts Miro Board Screenshot

What parts of the relocation/managed retreat, etc. process is easily funded through available sources, and what parts of the process are more difficult to access funding for?

What programs or funded sources have helped you in this work?

Though a relocation plan or strategy will be different for each Tribal community, what types of guidelines or frameworks might be helpful to Tribal planners working on this issue? (e.g., Emergency Mgmt., Hazard Mitigation, Managed Retreat Plan, etc.)



Figure 3: Community Relocation Access Miro Board Screenshot