

Tribal and Indigenous Engagement Summary

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Introduction

This document summarizes the significant findings from the engagements with seven Tribal Nations and Indigenous-led organizations. This information has been compiled separately here, as well as included in the overall Natural Climate Solutions Workforce Development and Training Needs Study (Study), to acknowledge and honor the unique and distinct relationships to land and place that Tribal and Indigenous communities hold. Additionally, its development separate from the Study allowed more time to complete interviews and be flexible to the schedules and capacities of Tribes.

Background

Through HB 3409, the legislature directed Oregon Climate Action Commission (OCAC) to establish a process for consultation with Tribal Nations in this state to advise the OCAC on the performance of its natural climate solutions (NCS) duties. OCAC is currently in a phase of discovery, uncovering past lessons learned by the Commission's efforts in working with Tribes, developing an understanding of Oregon Tribes' history and how that may inform this effort, identifying which Tribes are interested in engagement on this topic once funding is secured, and determining Tribal government staff contacts.

For this study, Serina Fast Horse of Kimimela Consulting conducted dialogues with seven Tribes and Indigenous-led organizations to illuminate nature-based workforce challenges and opportunities for Indigenous people and Tribal Nations. Kimimela Consulting's findings are a solid beginning and are informing the Commission's and ODOE's ongoing NCS work.

ODOE and the Commission have been conducting outreach to gauge Tribal Nation interest throughout 2025 and will continue crafting an in-depth process to work together as ODOE hears from Tribes. The engagements so far are listed here:

- In fall 2024, the Commission received a Draft Engagement Strategy,¹ presented by Against the Current Consulting. This strategy is guiding the approach that ODOE and the Commission are taking to work with the Tribes.
- In September 2024, Director Benner and Commission Chair Macdonald sent a formal letter to the Chairs of the nine federally recognized Tribes to provide an update on NCS work and to extend an offer to participate in the process to advise ODOE and the Commission on NCS workstream deliverables, including a Land-based Net Carbon Inventory, a NCS Workforce and Training Program Needs Study, and the adoption of NCS Goals and Metrics to increase net carbon sequestration and storage on the state's natural and working lands over time.
- In the first half of 2025, ODOE staff presented information about the engagement strategy to the climate resilience committee at the 2025 ATNI Winter Convention and at a culture resources cluster meeting facilitated by the Legislative Commission on Indian Services.
- In fall 2025, Director Benner and Commission Chair Macdonald sent an additional formal letter to update Tribes on the ongoing work and invite conversation about Tribal NCS efforts and interests.
- ODOE staff met with climate staff at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and learned of their effort to coalesce publicly available knowledge on climate resilience plans for each Tribe in Oregon. ODOE staff plan to review all available Tribal climate resilience documents and deepen engagement with Tribes in 2026.

While the work to establish this Study occurred rapidly and does not include perspective from all Oregon Tribes, state NCS work is ongoing. The Commission and ODOE have created a separate parallel process based on a longer timeframe to meaningfully engage with Tribal Nations. The approach aims to create meaningful interactions and co-develop next steps and a process for the Tribes to advise the Commission on NCS work.

Findings

Overall Themes

The following are themes that were present throughout all the interviews completed and represent a foundation of priorities and values for Tribes and Indigenous-led organizations.

¹ Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians Resolution #24-15, "Supporting Tribal Engagement and Climate Action in Oregon: Endorsement of the Oregon Climate Action Commission's Tribal Engagement Strategy in Alignment with Oregon House Bill 3409 Priorities."

While there are threads of commonality, it is important to understand that Tribes are distinct and varied in their cultures, context, and governance. One Tribal perspective does not represent all. Equal consultation of affected and interested Tribal nations before action is best practice for good Tribal relations.

Indigenous Traditional Ecological and Cultural Knowledge is Vital to Holistic Natural Climate Solutions

Indigenous Traditional Ecological and Cultural Knowledge (ITECK) is the collection of the understandings and practices that have been developed by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years of relationship to place — including the land, waters, and wildlife. It is Indigenous science. ITECK encompasses ways of being that align with the natural systems of ecology and provides vital insights into how we can support the natural healthy functions of ecosystems to help mitigate climate issues. This is a remarkable and powerful asset for NCS work when Tribes and Indigenous-led organizations are intentionally, meaningfully, and respectfully brought in as partners and co-creators.

Protection of Cultural/Natural Resources

Natural resources are cultural resources. They are the fundamental components that make up the entirety of Tribal cultures. Our foods, our clothes, our stories, our songs are all tied to the places and relatives that we depend on for life. In return we hold great reverence and responsibility to care for these resources. The survival of culturally significant species and places are important for cultural and natural resource preservation. As we look to the future of climate impacts, efforts to protect and support cultural resources are critical.

Decolonization and Indigenization

Over the course of the last 250 years, colonization in Oregon has directly caused severe and enduring harm to Indigenous peoples. The disruption of relationship to land and place through violent tactics of displacement and destruction of traditional landscapes have not only negatively impacted Indigenous cultures and peoples, they have also damaged natural ecological systems and created overwhelming dysfunction. Approaching NCS work through the lens of decolonization and indigenization will help to heal the harm that colonization and settlement have caused to lands, waters, and peoples. The first step to this is increasing representation and inclusion of Tribal and Indigenous voices, worldviews, and knowledge in the current systems and processes.

Workforce Landscape

Barriers and Challenges

Tribal and Indigenous communities face similar challenges as other communities, such as those in rural areas, but these are often exasperated by the lasting effects of historical marginalization and disenfranchisement. The following are challenges that have been identified in the current workforce landscape that pose barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment.

Employees

- Poverty
 - Poverty rates are higher among Native American populations and contribute to unmet needs, health disparities, and limited resources. Employees experiencing poverty are at a significant disadvantage for job opportunities creating a feedback loop of continued poverty. Support and accommodations, including those listed below, for low-income employees can help disrupt this cycle.
- Transportation
 - Transportation was one of the top cited challenges for employees in the NCS sector. Many employees don't have reliable access to a vehicle to get to work. Many NCS occupations include site-based work that requires varied travel and can be towns away. Additionally, NCS work often occurs in rural areas where locations are dozens of miles apart with no public transportation available. Moreover, young professionals face barriers to obtaining their driver's license such as inaccessible driver's education, inability to travel to a DMV, and lack of a vehicle to test in. Indigenous-specific workforce development programs include support for workers including providing temporary transportation.
- Housing
 - It was shared that many employees are houseless or face housing insecurity. Housing is a foundational need and the extra struggles and demands of living without it can cause employees to experience hardships: not having an address to list on applications or employment documents, not having an ID, lacking hygiene facilities, and generally being physically and mentally taxed. These challenges can also result in discrimination that make finding and keeping employment extremely challenging. Providing temporary or seasonal employee housing or housing stipends could alleviate this burden.
- Childcare
 - Employees with children face challenges related to affordability and accessibility of childcare. It is not an option to forgo childcare so if an employee is unable to

find reliable childcare, their job is immediately in jeopardy. Childcare support in the form of employer childcare options or childcare stipends would make a significant impact on the ability of working parents to stay in the workforce.

- Food Insecurity
 - There were anecdotal stories shared in these interviews about employees continually showing up to work without a lunch because of the inability to afford food. Going without food can lead to dangerous health outcomes and contribute to workplace accidents. This illustrated the importance of baseline needs being met for employee success. Indigenous-specific workforce development programs emphasize the need to provide food to employees that are experiencing food insecurity for employee wellness and workplace safety.
- Financial Literacy
 - Employees entering the workforce from Tribal and Indigenous communities sometimes lack the knowledge of how to open and manage a checking account, how to budget, and what financial supports, such as FAFSA, are available to them. Providing technical assistance and training programs for these topics could fill an important need.
- Lack of support from employers
 - All of the above challenges and barriers are often regarded by employers as a lack of responsibility and reliability from the employee when they are often out of the employee's control. This lack of understanding can lead to a lack of support from the employer who then penalize the employee, ultimately leading to unemployment.
- Lack of cultural understanding from employers
 - Finally, non-Indigenous employers often have no understanding of cultural needs and protocols such as needed to take time off for ceremonies and funerals. Non-Indigenous employers need policies that require cultural training and accommodations for cultural necessities.

Employers

- Pay and benefit competitiveness
 - Tribes have varied capacities and resources. Many Tribes rely on outside funding including grants to fund their programs and operations, including staff positions. Some Tribes who participated in this study shared that they have temporary positions that they would like to fund indefinitely but lack the sustained resources to do so. This can contribute high turnover and inability to recruit qualified workers.
- Limited office space

- Some Tribes lack the physical space for all of their staff to work in a shared office location. This can be challenging for growing their workforce and providing the setup for well-coordinated and collaborative in person teams.
- Housing availability and affordability
 - Some Tribes shared that their rural location contributed to challenges in finding housing for newly hired staff. Many jobs, especially those in the NCS sector, require in the field and on the ground presence which becomes an issue if a staff person is unable to find housing near the Tribe.

Vital Occupations

The following are some occupations that were identified by the participating Tribes and Indigenous-led organizations to be vital for successful and holistic natural climate solutions.

Culturally Trained Land Workers

Ecological cultural monitors and Tribal environmental stewards are some of the names used by Tribes for these occupations. Essentially, these are workers who are culturally trained in ITECK and then use that lens to assess ecosystems, make environmental plans, and apply land treatments. This is not currently a widespread role but could be invaluable to integrating ITECK for NCS work.

Fire Practitioners

Indigenous people have known since time immemorial that cultural burning is beneficial to forest and ecosystem health. Cultural burning practices help store carbon and promote NCS. More development and support of Tribal fire crews and programming can positively contribute to NCS work across the state.

Project Coordinators

Some of the often invisible yet essential labor that supports the NCS sector occurs on the logistical level. Project coordinators could serve a role that oversees the project at all levels to ensure that all the components across departments and teams are well-aligned and synergized. This role could also work within the community to gather stories and advocate for community benefits. Multiple study participants mentioned that a meaningful coordinator role would enhance the effectiveness and success across the lifetime of a project and supplement the often-limited scope of project managers.

Language Preservationists

Although many times forgotten or overlooked, language preservation is key to embracing and cultivating ITECK-infused NCS. Native languages embed understandings of the ecology and natural systems of place in words and phrases. For example, Tribal traditional place names are

often based on the characteristics or activities that occur there. Supporting language preservation will help unlock the fullest potential of ITECK.

Recommendations

1. Work with Tribal Affairs Director Shana Radford in the governor's office to foster a holistic approach to state Tribal relations.

The Tribal Affairs Director position in the governor's office is the first of its kind in the state of Oregon. Since being appointed in 2023, Shana Radford has been building a foundation of trust with Tribes for reciprocal and collaborative relationships. For consistency and culturally informed approaches, it is recommended to communicate and coordinate with Shana when planning to consult and partner with Tribes. This is not meant to shift the work and responsibility to Shana but rather promote greater synergy amongst state-Tribal relations efforts.

2. Continue engagement with Tribes.

a. Offer multiple opportunities for Tribal collaboration.

i. Tribes have varied resources and capacities throughout the year.

Providing multiple opportunities for involvement with different ways to engage such as written surveys, in person meetings, and virtual webinars can increase flexibility and promote more engagement.

b. Identify opportunities to partner with Tribes as partners on NCS and workforce development.

i. There is a lot of potential for partnering with Tribes on the state's NCS goals. Work needs to be done to make these connections and co-develop ideas.

ii. The Inter-Tribal Ecosystem Restoration Partnership (ITERP), managed by Lomakatsi Restoration Project, works with Tribal nations to build customized workforce development programs to meet their specific restoration goals through their unique cultural lens. The ITERP approach centers hands on skill building opportunities for Tribal communities and offers wrap-around support services that set up a foundation for successful careers. This program offers an important model and resource for supporting Tribal nations. (See attachment A for more information about Lomakatsi workforce development programs.)

c. Learn more about Tribes as key employers in rural counties.

i. To address the data gaps of this study about Tribes as employers, ODOE should work with Tribes to gather information on Tribal employment data with respect for data sovereignty.

- d. Participate in local and regional Tribal gatherings.
 - i. One of the best ways to connect with Tribes is by attending events where they are already gathering. Events like the Affiliated Tribe of Northwest Indians triannual conventions are open to all and are a good place to learn about the Tribal policy landscape and priorities.

3. Continue learning about Tribal histories and cultures.

- a. Coordination with intertribal organizations.
 - i. Connecting with intertribal organizations like the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission can provide information on current and historical context as well as potential partnerships and intersections. This is not a replacement for direct Tribal consultation.
- b. Consider the responsibilities of the state to engage with non-federally recognized Tribes and other Tribes with litigated and adjudicated Oregon land claims.
 - i. There are non-federally recognized Tribes and Tribes based in other states who have ancestral ties to Oregon. Their input on projects and programming that touch those lands is invaluable. Considering the implications of ignoring these voices and stories of the land is imperative for decolonized justice.
- c. Learn from and partner with Tribal and Indigenous specific workforce development programs like those that are highlighted in this Study.
 - i. NCS workforce development for Tribal and Indigenous communities is already occurring across the state. Learn from and uplift this work by partnering with these organizations and supporting these programs.

4. Improve and enhance funding support.

- a. Grants
 - i. Grants were a very frequently mentioned topic throughout this study. All of the participating Tribes and organizations rely on grants to support their work, one even mentioning that their office was managing 29 grants at the time. The following are some of the requests related to grant administration that would contribute to greater Tribal self-determination and capacity.
 - 1. Provide more Tribal-specific grant opportunities.
 - 2. Lower barriers to obtaining funding including application, reporting, and match requirements.
 - 3. Allow grant expenses to cover tangible items such as vehicles and office space.

4. Adjusting grant cycles to align with Tribal projects. Support multi-year projects so that Tribal vision can be implemented with longer-term timelines. Run grant cycles that don't require 6-months of review before being awarded (this can create gaps in funding).
5. Continue providing higher education funding through the Oregon Tribal Student Grant.

b. Innovative funding pathways

- i. Partnering with Tribes on shared positions that can be housed at both the Tribe and the state.
 1. US Fish and Wildlife funds a position that works part time for the agency and part time for a Tribe. This is an exemplary case study that provides an innovative and mutually beneficial partnership for land restoration work. More of these types of positions could make an incredible impact across state agencies and add capacity to Tribal nations.
- ii. Support growth and development of Tribal work crews.
 1. One Tribal participant shared that the state has done a good job at collaborating with them and implementing culturally informed plans on environmental projects by contracting work crews to complete the on-the-ground work. While this is sufficient in the meantime, ideally the Tribe would like to develop and manage their own work crews so that the entire project can be culturally informed. Identifying resources at the state level to support this would be a groundbreaking investment.
- iii. Support growth and development of local training programs that provide accessible pathways to NCS careers.
 1. There is a lack of local training programs for NCS careers in some parts of the state. Working with Tribes, intertribal organizations, and Indigenous-led organizations to develop or expand programming would help support clear pathways for youth and adults to NCS careers to meet the demand of the growing workforce and promote individual livelihoods.

5. Improve and enhance coordination.

- a. Find synergies with other Oregon state-Tribal engagements that are ongoing or developing.
 - i. There are other state initiatives to engage with Tribes on topics that have a nexus with NCS work. It would be worthwhile to connect with these

efforts to eliminate engagement and consultation redundancies and find efficiencies of time and resources. Some of the known and relevant efforts are listed here:

1. Governor hosted Tribal Government to Government Summits
2. OWRD Tribal Water Task Force development
3. ODEQ Tribal engagement on the 2050 Cleanup Program Strategic Plan

b. Connect with border state agencies and coordinate around interdependent issues.

- i. Other state agencies such as those in Washington were identified as leading exemplary Tribal relations and collaborations. Oregon state departments could learn from their projects and programs. Additionally, at least one Tribe mentioned the difficulty of working across state lines and that greater coordination among states would ease the burden of balancing sometimes conflicting policies. This would further promote more holistic NCS work that spans the entire pacific northwest bioregion.

Conclusion

Through this study, Kimímela Consulting engaged with seven Tribes and Indigenous-led organizations to begin dialogue about natural climate solutions and workforce development in the state of Oregon. This summary of significant findings provides a first glance at the values, priorities, and potential actions for ODOE and OCAC to consider. It is clear that there is interest and more work to be done to explore and assess meaningful partnerships with Tribal Nations as sovereign governments and Indigenous-led organizations as community serving entities.