# Natural Resources and Environment Team

The Natural Resources and Environment team (NRE) is responsible for GAO's work on agriculture and food safety; federal land and water resources; energy; environmental protection; U.S. and international nuclear (security) cleanup; and tribal and Native American issues. NRE's oversight responsibilities include the Departments of Agriculture, Interior and Energy; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Nuclear Regulatory Commission; the Army Corps of Engineers; and numerous small and independent agencies.

# Tribal and Native American Issues in GAO’s Work

# GAO has conducted investigations and audits of federal programs that serve Tribes and their citizens for many years. Oversight of individual jobs is done by teams with related subject matter expertise; for example, the Health Care team oversees GAO’s work on the Indian Health Service. Historically, directors in charge of the Federal Lands and Water portfolio and the Energy portfolio have taken primary responsibility for NRE’s work on tribal and Native American issues. However, following extensive work exposing challenges with Interior’s support of tribal energy development, the related creation of a high-risk list area focused on federal programs serving Tribes, and concerns tribal leaders raised directly with the Comptroller General, NRE started a dedicated portfolio in late 2019. The portfolio leads audits on core tribal issues such as tribal consultation, federal support for self-determination, protection of cultural resources, water and sanitation infrastructure, environmental remediation, climate change, gaming, and energy development.

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# Since late 2019, NRE’s Tribal and Native American Issues Area portfolio has acted as a GAO-wide focal point for all of GAO’s tribal work. Additionally, the portfolio has overseen a broader Tribal Initiative with several key goals, including:

# **Improving internal coordination**, by increasing NRE visibility into all tribal work throughout the agency; tracking reviews and our impact on Indian Country; and increasing consistent messaging around key tribal concepts such as sovereignty, self-determination, and the U.S. trust responsibility.

# **Improving external outreach**, such as coordinating outreach to the Hill and external organizations including SGCETC, NIHB, NAFOA, NCAI and others, and developing protocols for outreach to Tribes.

# **Enhancing GAO’s capacity and expertise**, through establishment of the Tribal Advisory Council; enhanced training on tribal issues; strategic recruitment of employees; and creation and dissemination of guidance and information.

# The establishment of the TAC was a top priority for the Tribal Initiative, followed by the creation of a GAO-wide Strategic Objective focused on **Efforts to Fulfill the Federal Government’s Responsibilities to Tribes, Their Members, and Individual Descendants.** The objective comprises three key performance goals:

1. Evaluate federal policies and programs that serve Indian Tribes, their members, and other Indigenous groups
2. Assess federal efforts to protect Native American cultural, environmental, and natural resources
3. Examine federal efforts to foster tribal self-determination, self-governance, and economic development

# GAO audits falling under the first performance goal are led by various mission teams throughout GAO, depending on the specific program or subject area. NRE leads or co-leads most audits that fall under the second or third performance goals; when it is not leading work, NRE participates as a reviewer and subject matter expert for reports under all three performance goals.

# **Ongoing NRE and Joint Reviews on Tribal Issues**

* **Interior's Trust Functions.** Examination of Interior’s decision to transfer trust responsibilities from the Office of the Special Trustee to the Bureau of Trust Funds Administration.
* **Border Wall Effects on Resources.** Review of the cultural and natural resource impacts of border wall building activities, and ongoing coordination between Interior and DHS on border wall construction issues.
* **DOI Real Estate Services for Tribes.** Examination of the timeliness of Interior’s support and processing for certain types of real estate transactions.
* **Electricity Microgrids in Tribal Communities.** Review of what is known about microgrid deployment on tribal lands and the potential for expanding microgrid technology.
* **BIA's Monitoring of Tribal Wells.** Examination of how BIA tracks and remediates abandoned wells from energy production on tribal lands.
* **Justice40 Implementation for Tribes.** Examination of the Justice40 initiative and how specific agencies are implementing eligible programs with respect to Tribes.
* **Navajo Nation Leasing.** Review of Interior’s support for the implementation of the Navajo Nation Leasing Act.
* **Tribal Co-Management of Federal Lands.** Examination of Interior and Forest Service efforts to pursue and implement agreements with Tribes to co-manage federal lands and waters.

# **Examples of Recently Released NRE-led and Joint Reviews**

* COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDS: Lessons Learned Could Improve Future Distribution of Federal Emergency Relief to Tribal Recipients ([GAO-23-105473](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105473)), Dec. 15, 2022
* TRIBAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Action is Needed to Better Understand the Extent of Federal Support ([GAO-22-105215](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-105215)), Aug. 30, 2022
* TRIBAL FUNDING: Actions Needed to Improve Information on Federal Funds that Benefit Native Americans ([GAO-22-104602](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104602)), May 19, 2022
* ALASKA NATIVE ISSUES: Federal Agencies Could Enhance Support for Native Village Efforts to Address Environmental Threats ([GAO-22-104241](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104241)), May 18, 2022
* INDIAN ENERGY SERVICE CENTER: Support Activities Have Been Provided, but Goals and Performance Measures Should Be Defined ([GAO-22-103514](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-103514)), Mar. 10, 2022
* COVID-19: Lessons Learned from Interior and Treasury’s Administration of CARES Act Funds Could Improve Federal Emergency Relief to Tribes ([GAO-22-104349](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104349)), Nov. 4, 2021
* MISSING OR MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN: New Efforts Are Underway but Opportunities Exist to Improve the Federal Response ([GAO-22-104045](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104045)), Oct. 28, 2021
* NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURAL RESOURCES: Improved Information Could Enhance Agency Efforts to Analyze and Respond to Risks of Theft and Damage ([GAO-21-110](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-110)), Mar. 4, 2021.
* EPA GRANTS TO TRIBES: Additional Actions Needed to Effectively Address Tribal Environmental Concerns ([GAO-21-150](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-150)), Oct. 20, 2020.
* TRIBAL PROGRAMS: Resource Constraints and Management Weaknesses Can Limit Federal Program Delivery to Tribes ([GAO-20-270T](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-270t)) Nov. 19, 2019.
* TRIBAL CONSULTATION: Additional Federal Actions Needed for Infrastructure Projects ([GAO-19-22](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-22)) Mar. 20, 2019.
* DRINKING WATER AND WASTERWATER INFRASTRUCTURE: Opportunities Exist to Enhance Federal Agency Needs Assessment and Coordination on Tribal Projects ([GAO-18-309](https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-309)), May 15, 2018.