



# WHITE EARTH RESERVATION

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**Testimony of  
Raymond Auginaush, Sr.  
District 1 Councilmember  
White Earth Tribal Nation**

**S.Bill 2610  
Tribal Energy Reauthorization Act  
Senate Indian Affairs Committee  
March 4, 2020**

Thank you Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall and all the distinguished Members of the Indian Affairs Committee. My name is Raymond Auginaush, District I Representative of White Earth Nation. It is an honor and a privilege to stand before you today with testimony on the need for increased federal resources to support tribal energy projects. I want to thank Senator Smith for submitting our request to testify. She has been a true friend to native people in Minnesota and throughout this nation

I have made the trip to Washington, D.C. to speak strongly in favor of S. 2610, the Tribal Energy Reauthorization Act. This legislation is critical to the future of all native people. We believe energy issues will be the basis for future economic development on tribal lands. This legislation will continue the excellent programs of the past and expand this critical area for native people in the future.

I, and all members of the White Earth Reservation Business Committee, appreciate today's scheduled hearing on this important matter for all native people. Much like other Minnesota Chippewa Tribe members, White Earth Reservation residents have suffered from the effects of energy poverty which results from extremely high energy costs in relation to minimal household income levels and poor energy efficiency. The factors contributing to this include poorly insulated homes, expensive fuel oil, propane and electric bills, frequent power disconnects, and high shut off and reconnection fees.

For the past 16 years, White Earth has worked with the Department of Energy to combat the reservation's energy crisis as we recognized economic opportunity comes from sustainably addressing this situation. The DOE has been supportive of our strategic energy planning, including conducting feasibility studies and renewable energy deployment for solar, biomass and wind projects. Specific DOE projects include:

- wind energy deployment in the form of one 750 kW and two 50 kW wind turbines,
- solar energy deployment ranging in size from 1.8 kW to 40 kW in 3 community facilities
- a biomass feasibility study for our tribal casino,
- and Tribal Energy Program First Steps funding to develop a comprehensive strategic energy plan.

Without DOE assistance, our limited resources would not have allowed the progress White Earth has achieved to this date. Energy is an emerging economic opportunity for White Earth and its people. Presently, the two largest employers on the reservation are the tribal casinos and the tribal government offices. When renewable energy is deployed, a vast number of new career opportunities are created in many different segments including engineering, management, administration, accounting and customer service; thus, increasing economic diversity for the people of White Earth.

In August 2019, the White Earth Reservation Business Committee passed a resolution launching the Renewable Energy Independence Initiative directed at taking control of the energy economy within the reservation boundaries, as well as seeking potential renewable energy investment opportunities that advance investment priorities.

The White Earth RBC is resolved to develop a comprehensive, clean energy independence master plan and to set forth a strategic vision for the production, distribution, consumption, and conservation of energy within the service delivery area of White Earth Reservation. The plan being developed will strive to:

- stabilize energy costs for White Earth residents,
- create greater control of energy imports,
- grow community capacity for self-generation by solving the community development process
- sustain and grow existing energy renewables.

White Earth is currently focusing on maximizing the development of wind and solar energy; however, other energy opportunities are emerging. White Earth anticipates pursuing additional DOE funding, including utilizing DOE tribal loan guarantees for future projects such as:

- Solar farms – White Earth is presently vetting developers with successful experience in developing 1 MW solar farms in Minnesota. Potential solar projects have been identified and include powering the tribal casino, constructing solar farms along existing power grids within the reservation boundaries and investing in off-reservation facilities throughout the state.
- Natural gas – White Earth has previously collaborated with multiple partners to bring natural gas to the city of Mahnomen and, more specifically, the tribal casino. This effort has made a substantial difference to the energy costs of the casino, which is one of the largest energy consumers on the reservation. Plans are currently being developed to bring natural gas to other reservation communities with the goal of considerable cost savings to individual households and other tribal facilities.
- Hydro energy – Opportunities are being explored that would allow White Earth to exert its sovereignty and delve into clean, renewable and cost competitive hydro energy.
- The creation of a tribal utility commission and electric utility – White Earth is committed to creating a tribal electric and natural gas utility commission. The efforts of the tribal utility commission would likely include acquisition of major components of the existing electrical distribution system and rebuilding as necessary for the needs of the community as it transitions to locally generated power and renewables.

Presently, an energy utility feasibility study is being developed that will guide leadership regarding organization and prioritizing projects throughout the decision-making process.

In closing, I would like to say Miigwech for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the people of White Earth. The White Earth Reservation Business Committee appreciates being included on this important matter and is happy our voice was heard today. Miigwech to the members of the committee for your hard work and dedication to improving the lives of all tribal members.