

Centering Indigenous Communities in Climate Change Funding

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Unprecedented federal investments are creating a once-in-a-generation opportunity to funnel billions of dollars towards strengthening economic resilience and encouraging climate change adaptation and mitigation in communities that are marginalized in our current system. Building on past successes in Alaska Native healthcare and recent advances in child protective services and education, Tribal organizations can call for and establish government-to-government agreements with federal and state agencies to carry out climate change adaptation and resilience projects across Indigenous communities.

In the last two years, the federal government has committed hundreds of billions of dollars to fight climate change and better support underserved communities. The [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) will deliver [\\$550 billion](#) of new infrastructure investment and the [Inflation Reduction Act](#) will [invest](#) more than [\\$300 billion](#) in energy security and climate change. The Biden-Harris Administration has also committed to the [Justice40 Initiative](#), which aims to deliver 40% of federal budgets for climate change and clean energy to disadvantaged communities.

Recognizing that these investments could drive positive change across Alaska, it is important for leaders within the state to be thoughtful about how the funding is used and who it benefits. People with economic and social privileges tend to have better access to programs or practices to protect themselves from the impact of climate change; this can broaden existing social and economic gaps. Government and other organizations need to adopt specific practices to [center equity in climate change solutions](#). Beyond that, the transition to a “green economy” poses [additional risks](#) for Indigenous communities, such as creating more demand for rare earth minerals whose mining has disproportionate negative impacts on Indigenous Peoples. Alaska needs to create a mechanism to receive and distribute this windfall climate response funding that does not perpetuate [inequity and erasure](#), instead returning control and decision-making to communities and Indigenous Peoples.

Equity in Action

The practical mechanism to carry out this vision already exists; it is called [compacting](#). Compacting is a government-to-government agreement in which the federal or state government recognizes Tribal sovereignty and authority to administer programs within their own communities. Compacting

agreements are negotiated to address a particular need or issue. Rather than the federal or state government funding and running programs for Indigenous communities from afar, that funding is transferred to Tribes or Tribally-designated nonprofit organizations. Tribes and Tribal organizations are ideally situated to know the challenges in their own communities and deploy workable, effective, and culturally appropriate climate solutions in the areas they know best.

A successful example of compacting between the federal government and Alaska Tribes already exists in the longstanding delivery of Tribal healthcare services. This compact, [established in 1994](#), has resulted in targeted healthcare delivery that is adaptive to the unique needs of Indigenous Alaskans. For example, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium swiftly worked in tandem with state and federal agencies to roll out [vaccines](#) faster than most of the country. This rapid response improved health outcomes in Alaska for Indigenous communities and other Alaskans alike.

Other examples of compacting between the federal government and Tribes also exist. For instance, in 2022, the U.S. Department of Transportation signed their [first ever compacting agreement](#) with the Cherokee Nation, transferring authority to the Cherokee Nation to design and direct funds into transportation projects on their reservation.

Recent efforts have sought to build on the success of healthcare compacting to include [child protective services](#) and [education compacting](#) with the Alaska state government. The Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact [aims to support Alaska Native children and families](#) by reducing the number of children in State custody and increasing the number of children who are placed within their home communities. Tribally run education compacting is still in development. Educational leaders within Indigenous communities and the State of Alaska have [laid out a path](#) for giving Tribes the option to take ownership of education in their communities.

Focus on Climate

Existing compacting agreements in Alaska have been successful at addressing seemingly intractable problems. Climate change sits alongside healthcare and child services as one of the most pressing issues facing Indigenous communities. The pace of warming in the Arctic is more than three times the rate of the rest of the globe, and Indigenous communities are on the front lines of climate change.

Climate change impacts nearly all aspects of life, from food security and health to economic development and cultural vitality. To give just a few examples, water-related illnesses, more frequent and intense wildfires, and other extreme weather events create significant health concerns for Arctic residents. Climate change creates uncertainty around subsistence food safety and availability, which is a cornerstone of Indigenous community wellbeing and nutrition. All of these impact mental and physical health. Climate change is a universal experience for Alaskan communities, each of whom approach these challenges with diverse and hyper-local perspectives. Indigenous communities should decide how to [manage their lands and waters](#) in the face of climate change, define climate impacts, and enact climate change response plans.

To protect our planet and vulnerable communities, Alaskans need to turn the current system on its head. A compacting agreement would return control and decision making to Indigenous communities who have thousands of years of experience innovating to live in the Arctic. Compacting would allow funding to be spent more effectively to mitigate one of the most pressing issues of our time. It would allow Indigenous communities to navigate systems that are more familiar, closer to home, and easier to relate to compared with state or federal offices. Additionally, it would be a win for government agencies that [need local partners](#) in order to successfully invest hundreds of billions of dollars in climate change funding. Investing in people on the ground with a deep knowledge of place will also likely save money for taxpayers and the federal government, while achieving better outcomes.

Working with the Federal System

One challenge that would need to be addressed in the process of creating a compact for climate change funding is effectively organizing across disparate programs that address varied climate change impacts. Federal climate change programs exist across a variety of agencies, each with its own funding schema and often onerous proposal and reporting requirements. Consistent funding and streamlined processes via a compacting agreement would bolster the effectiveness of Indigenous-led climate solutions. Increased coordination within the federal government is needed to give Tribes more clarity around who to work with on comprehensive climate change approaches. Efforts are underway to better link climate change response efforts across the federal government, but more work remains. Alaskan communities need a systematic federal approach to funding and coordination that matches the scope of the issue. It is important that various agencies and decision-makers at all levels work together to support community response and resilience.

Recently, the U.S. Government Accountability Office recommended forming a coordinating body “to strategically target federal investments to Alaska Native villages facing significant environmental threats” ([report 22-104241](#)). In 2022, the Alaska Federation of Natives passed [resolution 22-13](#) which voiced strong support for the establishment of such an entity. With effort from a coalition of Tribes and federal agencies, a compacting agreement could emerge to connect funding streams from multiple agencies. While this would take time and resources to develop, it is an important opportunity for an interagency approach that directly supports [Biden administration priorities, including](#) climate, racial equity, and economy.

Alternatively, a compacting agreement could begin with Tribes who already have existing compacting agreements that could expand to include climate adaptation and response. This would demonstrate proof of concept for a more streamlined compact, while constraining the terms to those of an existing agreement. Tribes should direct a process that works for them and decide the details of a compacting arrangement. There are many details to resolve. This is a large coalition-building effort, and the first step is to gather input and ideas.

An Opportunity to Heal

While the last few years have generated unprecedented funding for climate change response, these efforts are a marathon, not a sprint. Climate change is a challenge that Alaska and the world will reckon with far into the future. Creating compacting agreements for Indigenous communities now will promote equity and self-determination and allow the whole state to grow stronger over time. Without thoughtful consideration, climate change effects and response efforts only [deepen inequity and hardship](#) among our planet's marginalized communities.

Compacting for climate change creates an opportunity for Tribes and Indigenous Peoples to help heal the planet by leading through values, wisdom, and meaningful partnership. Alaska has the expertise to model this way forward. It will take a strong coalition from around the state and across the nation, but together there is nothing we cannot do.

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Banner photo from St. Paul, Alaska by AVF Project Manager of the [Kuinneraq Sustainable Future Project](#) [Nalikutaar, Jacqueline Cleveland](#). Jacqueline is a Yup'ik subsistence hunter, fisherwoman, and gatherer from Quinhagak and a citizen of the Native Village of Kwinhagak Tribal Government. As a filmmaker and photographer, Jacqueline's work focuses on elevating the languages and cultures of Alaska Native peoples.