



WESTERN STATES
WATER COUNCIL



NATIVE AMERICAN
RIGHTS FUND

February 25, 2025

Secretary Doug Burgum
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Re: Critical Nature of the Secretary's Indian Water Rights Office

Secretary Burgum;

As you consider the ongoing roles of Interior Department offices and staff as directed by the White House, we write to emphasize the vital importance of the Secretary's Indian Water Rights Office ("SIWRO") in settling Indian reserved water rights. For over 40 years, the Western States Water Council and the Native American Rights Fund have worked together to support the negotiated settlement of Indian water rights claims. Western States and Tribal Nations rely on SIWRO to coordinate settlements to resolve tribal water claims and bring certainty to tribal and non-tribal water users. This work has never been more critical.

Western water resource situations are increasingly difficult; drought and flooding are stressing existing management frameworks and exacerbating water supply inefficiencies. While Congress has authorized 35 Indian water rights settlements, the water rights claims of most Tribal Nations remain unquantified, and the cost and complexity of resolving these claims is increasing. Unresolved water claims leave Tribes and tribal members without safe drinking water, without community water infrastructure, and severely hamstring economic development. Quantifying Indian water rights claims and determining their impacts on state-issued rights is essential for Western States and Tribal Nations to address increasing water demands.

The SIWRO negotiates and oversees implementation of Indian water rights settlements, provides a unified federal voice in the settlement process, and is critically important to Western States and Tribal Nations. SIWRO currently coordinates and supports federal settlement activities via 45 federal negotiation, assessment, and implementation teams working throughout the Western United States. SIWRO's expertise makes it the most important federal office that addresses the resolution of Indian water rights claims. SIWRO must continue to monitor and carry out the terms and conditions of existing tribal water rights settlements to which the United States is a party and proactively carry out the federal government's fiduciary obligations to support and assist Tribal Nations interested in negotiating and enforcing other potential water rights settlements.

We urge you to consider the unique and essential work of SIWRO to support water management and water security in the Western states and for Tribal Nations. If you have any questions, we would be happy to discuss these programs and their importance to our communities.

Respectfully,

Tony Willardson, Executive Director
Western States Water Council

John E. Echohawk, Executive Director
Native American Rights Fund