

ROLL CALL



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A Program That's Working for American Indians

By **Tex Hall**

SPECIAL TO ROLL CALL

This year, as Congress considers amendments to a critical government initiative that is helping American Indians, our nation celebrates 400 years since the establishment of Jamestown. This event changed the face of North America and set off the building of the greatest country on the globe, the United States of America.

We as Indian people were there, we know it well. We viewed that historic day, not from the bow of a ship, but from the shoreline, from the lands we have been stewards of for 10,000 years. Every day since, we have been there — we endured the forced removal of our people every time this growing nation found wealth and economic opportunity within our villages, our hunting grounds and our sacred mountains.

Yet as American Indians, we love this country, and we embrace it as a great democracy. We have served in its military to defend what it stands for in every conflict since its founding; and we will continue to do so, proudly and honorably.

But our communities continue to be the most impoverished in the nation. Nine of the 10 poorest communities in the country are home to American Indians. Clearly, we have been left behind.

The initiative under review by Congress, the Small Business Administration Tribal/Alaska Native Corps. 8(a) program, is one of the most successful business development programs in decades. It is creating for the first time a business pathway that represents our best hope to non-gaming economic development and a pathway to economic self-sufficiency for Indian country.

Today, some in Congress are advancing legislation to restrict and threaten the very existence of the SBA 8(a) program. Some have confused community enterprise with individual enterprise, comparing apples to oranges. Tribal and ANC 8(a)s are not tasked with elevating the economic status of a single owner or a few partners. Instead, tribal 8(a) businesses are owned by and obligated to entire communities. These firms are our best tools for advancing social, cultural and economic well-being, while kindling a business approach to achieving these goals.

Indeed, our participation is barely a blip on the screen of all federal contracts. To speak of restricting and limiting SBA 8(a)s when our total contract awards represent eight-tenths of 1 percent of all federal contracts is clearly an affront to tribal businesses in every state.

We must not return to the dark days. My people have lived through centuries of misguided policies that failed to understand our strength and abilities, failed to respect our contribution to a great country, and failed to embrace our hopes and dreams for our cultures, our elders and our youths. The result has been extraordinary and unnecessary destruction. The basis of our tribal governments, our tribal businesses and our community corporations is to fulfill a larger and communal responsibility to our communities, to our neighbors and to all Americans to perpetuate our unique cultures and way of life — to be concerned with the well-being of the many.

Many policymakers understood our history, our priorities and our goals of engaging American business tools to serve community needs when they established the SBA 8(a) program. From both sides of the aisle, these policy leaders got it exactly right, to create a business pathway for our tribes and community enterprises to more fully participate in the national economy.

We all know the history of treaties with my people — promises made and subsequently broken. Today, we face astronomical odds as we struggle to overcome poverty, educational and social issues.

But history does not have to repeat itself. The choice is clear: Congress can set a good example by demonstrating, through action, that our federal government honors its word — and keeps its promise to our native people — by expanding, not restricting, tribal participation in the SBA 8(a) program. Now is the time when we should be strengthening, not weakening, one of the best business development programs available to Indian country.

Tex Hall is chairman of the Inter-Tribal Economic Alliance, a national nonprofit promoting economic development in rural American Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages and Hawaiian homelands.