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National \$1.7M Grant Backs Tribal-Led Push to Build Markets for Wood That Would Otherwise Go to Waste

A Tribal-led effort will turn small trees, wildfire fuel, and other overlooked wood into new jobs and healthy forests while growing Tribal businesses and workforce

Sustainable Northwest (SNW), the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC), and the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities announced a five-year, \$1.7 million award today to help Tribes across the country build new markets for wood that's often left behind – small trees, brush, and low-grade logs that pile up as wildfire fuel instead of being put to use. The funding comes from the U.S. Endowment, which selected the SNW-ITC partnership as one of just five projects nationwide.

"Indigenous forest management isn't a side conversation. It's the model," said Cal Mukumoto, executive director of the Intertribal Timber Council. "This funding lets us build the business infrastructure that creates stable and expanding markets for small diameter and woody biomass. The work aligns with Tribal stewardship principles and priorities like reducing wildfire risk, restoring wildlife habitat, conserving clean water, supporting cultural forest resources, growing Tribal business, and more."

Decades of disinvestment in forest management and Tribal communities

Tribal forests are the ecological, economic, and cultural backbone of many Native communities, but chronic underinvestment has left them struggling. Across the country, over 310 Tribally owned forests span 19.3 million acres of trust land, including 10.2 million acres of commercial forest. Yet a 2023 federal assessment found Indian trust forests are funded at roughly a third the per-acre rate of comparable federal forests, leaving departments understaffed and stands dangerously overgrown.

As a result, Tribes harvest only about half of their annual allowable cut. In addition, decades of closures of rural mills and biomass facilities have stripped away the local infrastructure to process timber. Tribal and rural projects are often passed over by investors because they are perceived as small-scale and high risk, so the long-term financing needed to rebuild mills, biomass plants, and transportation networks is hard to secure, even where forests urgently need active management and communities have the workforce ready to do so.

"It is a self-reinforcing cycle: without market access, restoration stalls; without restoration, forest health declines and wildfire risks increase; and without wood and biomass revenue, communities can't

sustain the very operations that would break that cycle,” said Dylan Kruse, president of Sustainable Northwest.

Tribal Nations offer solutions

SNW and ITC will work directly with Tribal Nations to provide expert business development and financing support to help Tribes develop real, fundable projects that use underutilized wood; connect Tribes with buyers and investors; and help build the workforce and infrastructure to sustain that work well beyond the life of the grant. A new "Wood and Biomass Hub," housed at ITC, will anchor the effort, starting with three pilot Tribal communities and building a model that can spread across ITC's network of more than 60 member Tribes nationwide.

"Tribes have always known how to manage these forests," Mukumoto said. "What's often missing is the financial and technical runway to act on that knowledge at scale. The Intertribal Timber Council and Sustainable Northwest can help build that runway – the market connections, the financing know-how, and now this hub. We can strengthen Tribal sovereignty and economic opportunity while producing needed wood products and making America's forests healthier."

Over five years, this project will:

- Turn tens of millions of board feet of overlooked wood into products people can buy
- Help attract millions of dollars in new infrastructure investment
- Get new Tribal business ideas to the point where they're ready for funding
- Support new jobs
- Support forest stewardship on tens of thousands of acres of Tribal land
- Help partnering Tribes boost mill production

This builds on wood market and forest stewardship work SNW is already doing with Tribal partners, and deepens a long-running partnership between SNW and ITC focused on growing markets and demand for sustainable Tribal wood products and biomass energy. Our shared vision is to greatly increase Tribal access to the wood products industry and increase Tribal stewardship of forested landscapes with the goals of improving forest health, advancing Tribal sovereignty, and creating opportunities for Tribal economies and businesses to thrive.

About the Intertribal Timber Council

Established in 1976, the Intertribal Timber Council (ITC) is a nationwide nonprofit of Indian Tribes, Alaska Native Corporations, and individuals dedicated to advancing Tribal self-determination in forest management and natural resource conservation. Combining Traditional Ecological Knowledge with modern science, the ITC promotes holistic ecosystem stewardship that protects tribal lands and supports Native communities. The ITC has been a leading voice in natural resource policy, driving key federal legislation, supporting independent research on Tribal forests, and investing in Indigenous forestry professionals through scholarship programs.

About Sustainable Northwest

Sustainable Northwest is a nonprofit forging locally led solutions so nature, people, and economies can thrive. We partner with Tribal and rural communities throughout the Northwest on projects that promote smart water use, clean energy, and healthy forests, farms, and ranches. Our solutions are as unique as the problems we solve and include entrepreneurship, policy, market innovations, public and private investment, collaboration, and technical assistance.