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**File Code:** 1560; 1950**Date:** May 25, 2021**Route To:****Subject:** Early Tribal Engagement Guidance**To:** Directors, Forest Supervisors, Area Supervisor, and Forest Manager

The USDA Forest Service has a unique government-to-government trust responsibility with federally recognized Tribal governments. The enclosed guidance has been provided by the Southern Region Tribal Relations program to help forests navigate early Tribal engagement in the forest planning process and project development, including during the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Forest Plan Revision process. This guidance is meant to be fluid and will be updated as best practices are learned and implemented.

Enclosed are two toolkits: 1) Early Tribal engagement for NFMA/NEPA and 2) Early Tribal Engagement for Forest Plan Revision. Both toolkits are comprised of the following components: 1) Narrative, which describes the purpose and application of the tool kit components, 2) Checklist, which provides guidance on steps and can be used in the project management or planning process, 3) Letter template, which we recommend utilizing to increase consistency in our correspondence with Tribes. Also enclosed is a current spreadsheet of points of contact within Tribal organizations.

The USDA Forest Service recognizes that the United States government and the governments of Indian Tribes have a unique government-to-government relationship based on U.S. constitution, treaties, Federal statutes, court decisions, and executive branch policies, as well as moral and ethical considerations. This special relationship has emphasized meaningful involvement in federal decision-making.

As a federal agency, the USDA Forest Service has a responsibility to include and honor the contributions of Indian Tribes to the process every step of the way. Centering Indian Tribes in the planning process enables Tribes to steer the planning processes towards the greatest protection of resources that are of interest to their communities. Coordination with Indian Tribes should be initiated early in the planning process, so that all perspectives can be considered.

In a recent listening session with the Tribes, the following themes emerged: 1) When we are engaging with Tribes, 2) Who we are engaging with (tribal government, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO), tribal emergency management, tribal environmental department, etc.), 3) How the agency is engaging with Tribes, and 4) What topics and where are of interest to Tribes. It is important to remember that our Tribal partners, due to this unique government-to-government relationship, have a special status that is different than our other stakeholders or partners. This unique relationship must be recognized in our correspondence and how we respond to tribal feedback to achieve meaningful consultation as required by law and regulation.



The USDA Forest Service responsibility to Indian Tribes goes beyond Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) and consultation under the NEPA. Staff assigned to serve as Tribal Relations Specialist (Tribal Liaison) on the units and forests need to recognize these unique responsibilities and interact and correspond with Indian Tribes accordingly.

The documents contained in these toolkits are intended to be dynamic and adaptive. For feedback or questions on how to use these tools, please contact the Regional Tribal Relations Specialist, Lexie Rue-Harris, at 479-508-7553 or [Lexie.Rue-Harris@usda.gov](mailto:Lexie.Rue-Harris@usda.gov).

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kenderick Arney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Kenderick" and last name "Arney" clearly distinguishable.

KENDERICK ARNEY  
Regional Forester

Enclosures (3)

cc: Lexie Rue-Harris