



441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

July 31, 2026

The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources
House of Representatives

Federal Land and Water Management: Lessons Learned from Implementing Federal-Tribal Shared Decision-Making Agreements

Dear Ranking Member Huffman:

Federal agencies manage public lands and waters, including national forests and parks, that are tribal ancestral territories and have special importance to Tribes.¹ The Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior, and their subcomponent agencies, collaborate with Tribes to fulfill their missions and their unique federal trust and treaty responsibilities.² For example, various federal natural resource management agencies have entered into “shared decision-making” agreements under which Tribes provide substantive input on federal natural and cultural resource management decisions over many years. Such agreements have covered a range of tribal involvement. For example, Tribes help federal agencies develop and implement resource management plans, administer all or parts of national monument operations, and design and implement wildfire risk reduction activities.

In January 2026, we reported on factors that affected agency and tribal efforts to develop shared decision-making agreements.³ In light of information included in our report, you asked us to describe any lessons that federal agencies and Tribes learned while implementing shared decision-making agreements. To do so, we reviewed information we collected in interviews with the parties to the shared decision-making agreements discussed in our previous report.⁴ We analyzed statements related to implementing their agreements and identified several lessons

¹As of June 2026, there were 575 federally recognized Tribes in the contiguous U.S. and Alaska, which we refer to as Tribes in this report. 91 Fed. Reg. 4102 (Jan. 30, 2026). The federal government recognizes these Tribes as distinct, independent political entities that possess certain powers of self-governance and that maintain government-to-government relations with the United States.

²These subcomponents include the U.S. Forest Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service.

³GAO, *Federal Land and Water Management: Additional Actions Would Strengthen Agreements with Tribes*, [GAO-26-106626](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 28, 2026).

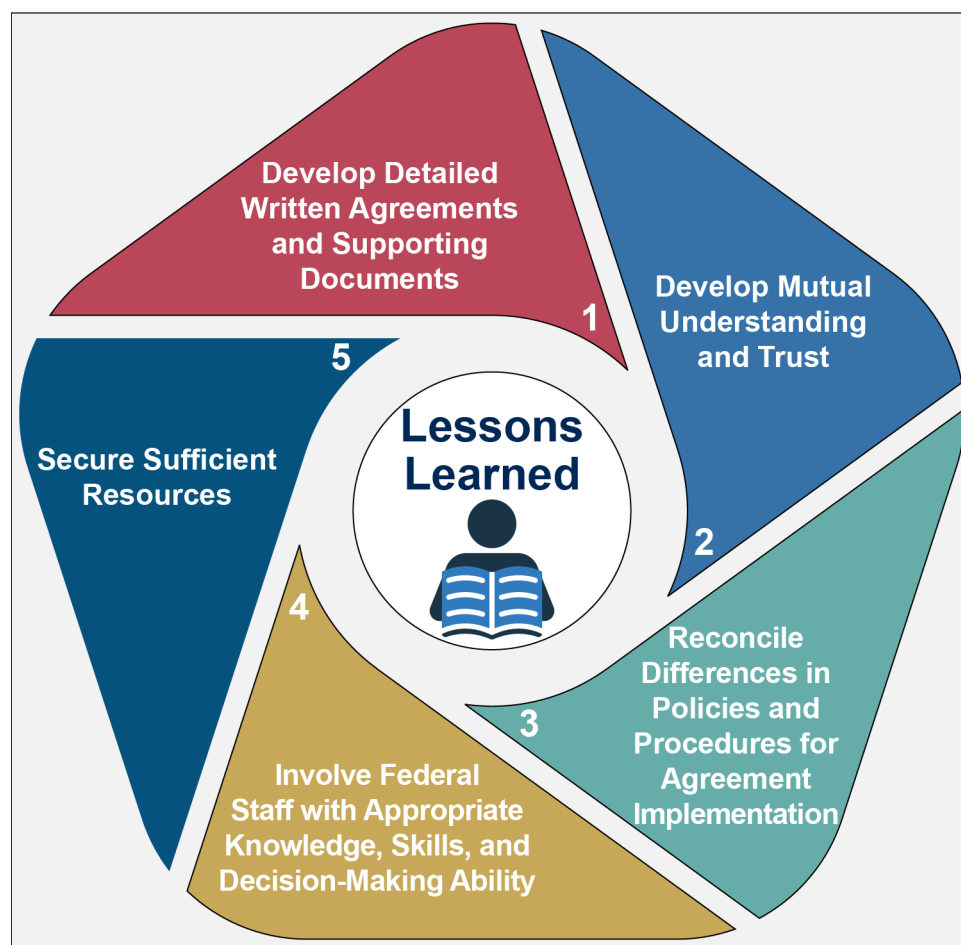
⁴In our January 2026 report, we selected five shared decision-making agreements to review in depth. Four of these agreements included federal and tribal parties, and one agreement included federal and Native Hawaiian community parties. To obtain perspectives beyond our selected agreements, we interviewed an additional 10 Tribes and one Alaska Native Corporation who were also parties to shared decision-making agreements. We reviewed content from these interviews for this report and refer to that input collectively as tribal input.

learned. We assessed details regarding the parties' experiences implementing these agreements. We also identified key questions related to each lesson learned that would be useful for federal agencies and Tribes to consider when implementing such agreements.⁵

We conducted this performance audit from February 2026 to July 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In summary, we identified five lessons learned from the implementation of shared decision-making agreements between federal agencies and Tribes (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Lessons Federal Agency and Tribal Officials Learned from Implementing Shared Decision-Making Agreements



Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108965

⁵We are presenting these lessons at a high level and they do not reflect all the nuances described by parties to the agreements. In addition, we categorized these lessons for ease of presentation, but some of the information in one lesson may be applicable to the other lessons in this report. The lessons may also be relevant for agencies and Tribes in the process of developing their agreements.

Agency Comments

We provided a copy of this report to Interior, Commerce, and the Forest Service through Agriculture for review and comment. Interior's National Park Service and Agriculture's Forest Service provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. Commerce did not provide comments on our report.

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We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, and the Interior; relevant Tribes; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Anna Maria Ortiz, Director, at OrtizA@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this report. In addition, Leslie Kaas Pollock (Assistant Director), Keesha Luebke (Analyst-in-Charge), Adrian Apodaca, Casey L. Brown, John Delicath, Jack Granberg, Serena Lo, and Jeanette Soares contributed to this report.

Sincerely,

//SIGNED//

Anna Maria Ortiz
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

Enclosure - 1

Lesson Learned #1:

Develop Detailed Written Agreements and Supporting Documents



Cover page of a supporting document for an agreement between the U.S. Forest Service and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Source: Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. | GAO-26-108965

Example of Lesson

A representative for tribal parties to one agreement said that when meeting with federal officials, tribal parties regularly cited specific agreement language regarding the role of Tribes and their traditional knowledge to remind federal officials of commitments documented in the agreement.

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-26-108965

Importance of Lesson

Detailed written agreements, updated as appropriate, can help federal agencies and Tribes articulate a common understanding of how the agreement will be implemented and achieve mutual accountability. Agreements that lack details can result in differing interpretations, which can disrupt implementation.

Detailed written agreements and supporting documents, such as guidance and operation manuals, can:

- provide clarity regarding aspects of implementing the agreement (e.g., specifying roles and responsibilities, decision-making procedures, and dispute resolution processes); and
- offer direction and continuity, to take into account turnover within agencies or tribal leadership.

Key Considerations for Agency and Tribal Officials

- Is the agreement in writing?
- Does the agreement or supporting documentation clearly identify how the parties will implement the agreement?
- Have parties defined and agreed upon important terms and concepts (e.g., natural resources, cultural resources, or co-stewardship)?
- Have parties documented significant decisions and past actions to help future staff understand the context in which they are working?
- Have parties agreed to regularly review written agreements and supporting documents and update them as appropriate?

Lesson Learned #2: Develop Mutual Understanding and Trust



Hoonah Indian Association and Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve leaders gathered in 2016 to celebrate the construction of the Huna Tribal House, a traditional Lingit structure. The Tribe and National Park Service worked collaboratively to plan and build the Tribal House, which serves as a venue for tribal members to share their culture and history.

Source: National Park Service. | GAO-26-108965

Example of Lesson

Tribal officials party to one agreement said agency staff met with them in person, had open minds, and treated them with respect. This encouraged candid conversations and helped participants better understand one another's perspectives.

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-26-108965

Importance of Lesson

Developing an understanding of each party's perspective and culture can help agencies and Tribes understand each other's motivations for working together and build trust. Lack of mutual understanding and trust can impede communication and decision-making among parties.

Developing mutual understanding and trust can include:

- dedicating time to sharing perspectives, learning from one another, and cultivating personal relationships. This can include taking joint field trips or attending cultural learning events;
- federal officials describing the legal framework that governs federal natural and cultural resource management to help tribal officials understand the basis for agency approaches; and
- tribal officials sharing information about their Tribe's ways of life, culture, and laws to improve the agency's understanding of tribal perspectives and values, which are at the core of their approaches to natural and cultural resource management.

Key Considerations for Agency and Tribal Officials

- Have federal agency and tribal officials developed strategies to build trust?
- Have parties taken concerted efforts to:
 - learn about the basis for each party's participation in the agreement;
 - understand each other's approaches to natural and cultural resource management; and
 - recognize constraints on their participation, such as legal limitations?

Lesson Learned #3:

Reconcile Differences in Policies and Procedures for Agreement Implementation



Welcome sign at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument in New Mexico, managed in partnership by the Bureau of Land Management and Pueblo de Cochiti.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108965

Importance of Lesson

When federal agencies and Tribes develop compatible policies and procedures for agreement implementation that reflect their commitments to working together, they can ease the agreement implementation process.

Some federal policies can pose challenges for Tribes, especially, for example, when more than one agency is a party to the agreement or an agency has prescribed timelines that do not provide sufficient time to obtain tribal government input. If agency officials assume that Tribes can or will follow agency procedures and timelines without seeking input from Tribes, it can lead to implementation delays and degraded relationships.

Reconciling differences in policies and procedures, to the extent legally permissible, can include:

- creating common terminology and definitions;
- adapting agency decision-making processes to include tribal input; and
- developing document review and decision-making timelines that account for all parties' capacity and approval procedures, when legally permissible.

Key Considerations for Agency and Tribal Officials

- Do relevant policies and procedures reflect the agencies' current approach regarding working with Tribes?
- Have parties identified existing policies and procedures that can create challenges to working together, such as contrasting definitions or differing timelines?
- To what extent is developing compatible policies and procedures legally permissible and appropriate?
- Have federal officials identified agency procedures that are flexible and capable of being modified based on tribal input?
- When more than one federal agency is involved in implementing an agreement, have the parties determined which agency's procedures will be followed?¹

Example of Lesson

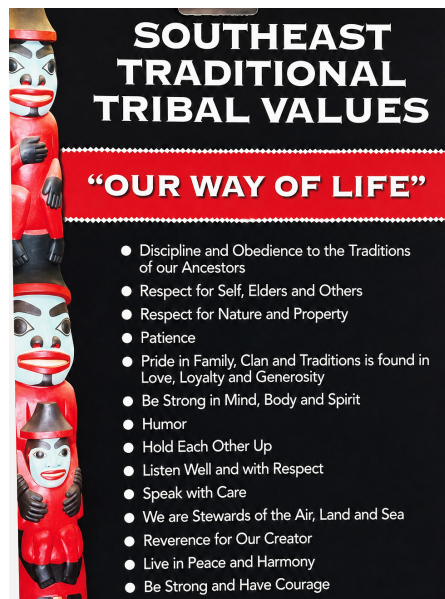
One tribal official said that federally imposed timelines for Tribes to review materials can be too short. For example, the official said federal agencies told multiple Tribes, who are parties to an agreement for managing a national monument, that the Tribes needed to develop and finalize a planning document within a certain timeframe. The timeframe was challenging for the Tribes to meet, in part because of the time needed for the tribal representatives to coordinate with each other and their governments.

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-26-108965

¹For information that can help agencies collaborate more effectively, see GAO, *Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges*, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

Lesson Learned #4:

Involve Federal Staff with Appropriate Knowledge, Skills, and Decision-Making Ability



A tribal poster posted on the wall in a U.S. Forest Service office in Alaska.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108965

Example of Lesson

One agency official said that they typically have staff attend meetings with Tribes on behalf of decision-making officials; the staff would then brief the officials prior to any decisions being made. However, a representative for Tribes who are parties to one agreement said they had to repeat meetings when federal agencies did not send staff with the relevant skills, knowledge of their legal authorities, or ability to make decisions on behalf of the agency.

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-26-108965

Importance of Lesson

Federal agency staff can strengthen agreement implementation when they have sufficient knowledge and skills, including understanding core concepts that underlie partnering with Tribes, and are allowed to make decisions on behalf of their agency to the extent legally permissible. For example, core concepts include Tribes' political relationship with the U.S.² When parties do not have the appropriate knowledge or ability to make decisions, it can slow agreement implementation and decrease its effectiveness.

When knowledgeable agency staff leave their positions, such as when their assignment term ends, agencies may need to train and educate their replacements. Tribal staff have had to educate new federal staff, which is time-consuming and can delay the Tribe's proposed agreement implementation activities, according to tribal officials.

In addition to training and educating staff, agencies can use existing statutory authority to hire qualified individuals from within tribal communities to help improve the agency's knowledge and skill base, according to federal officials. For example, federal land management agencies are authorized to hire candidates who, by reason of having lived or worked in or near public lands, have special knowledge or expertise concerning the natural or cultural resources of public lands and their management.³

Key Considerations for Agency and Tribal Officials

- Have parties identified the appropriate knowledge and skills federal staff need to implement the agreement?
- Ahead of meetings, have federal and tribal officials committed to having relevant and knowledgeable staff participate, including those allowed to make decisions on behalf of their agency?
- Do agency staff have sufficient knowledge of laws and agency policies, particularly on the extent the agency can legally share decision-making with Tribes?
- Do agencies have protocols for training new staff involved in implementing agreements following staff turnover?
- Have agencies considered extending assignment timeframes, to the extent legally permissible, to allow knowledgeable staff to remain involved in agreement implementation activities?
- Have agencies sought to use existing authorities to hire qualified individuals from within tribal communities with relevant knowledge and skills to participate in agreement implementation?

²For more information on these core concepts, see [GAO-26-106626](#).

³Pub. L. No. 96-487, § 1308, 94 Stat. 2371, 2480 (1980) (codified as amended at 16 U.S.C. § 3198).

Lesson Learned #5: Secure Sufficient Resources



Field trip to wildfire risk reduction project site in Minnesota during a federal-tribal co-stewardship symposium in June 2023.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108965

Importance of Lesson

Securing sufficient resources, including funding and staffing, is critical to agency and tribal participation in agreement implementation. For example, agencies provided funding for tribal costs for several agreements, but it was not always sufficient to cover participation costs, according to agency and tribal officials. Such costs could include, for example, the operations of a monument or travel to meetings.

Without sufficient resources, some agencies and Tribes have had to reduce their agreement commitments, such as participation in planning and decision-making meetings.

Securing sufficient resources is challenging, especially in constrained budget environments and with fluctuating leadership priorities. Doing so can include:

- renegotiating agreements to provide additional federal funds to Tribes to the extent the agency has the authority and appropriations to do so;
- using certain funding agreements, such as those that accompany tribal self-governance compacts with the Department of the Interior;⁴ and
- Tribes obtaining financial or technical support from nonprofit organizations when tribal or federal funding is not available or sufficient.

Key Considerations for Agency and Tribal Officials

- Have parties determined what federal and tribal resources are available and what resource limitations exist?
- Are resources committed for the duration of the agreement's implementation to the extent legally permissible?
- Have agencies requested the funding necessary to implement shared decision-making agreements?
- Can nonprofit organizations supplement tribal resources needed for agreement implementation that might be limited (e.g., funding, staffing, administrative, or technical capacity)?

Example of Lesson

To support implementation of one agreement, a tribal nonprofit organization helped five Tribes work with federal agencies to manage a national monument. The nonprofit's support included organizing meetings, facilitating site visits to the national monument, and the development of a natural and cultural resource management plan.

Source: GAO interview. | GAO-26-108965

⁴Title IV of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, as amended, authorizes Tribes to enter into self-governance compacts and funding agreements with Interior to assume the administration of certain programs, services, functions, and activities that the agency would otherwise conduct. Indian Self-Determination Act Amendments of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-413, tit. II, 108 Stat. 4250, 4270-78 (codified as amended at 25 U.S.C. §§ 5361-5377). Self-governance compacts' funding agreements provide an amount of funds that is not less than the amount (1) the Secretary of the Interior would have otherwise provided for the included program's operations and (2) for reasonable costs for activities the Tribe must carry out to comply with the compact's terms and prudent management. Compact and funding agreements may have a duration of multiple years. Self-governance compacts provide Tribes with flexibility in administering the programs, services, functions, and activities included in them. In addition to this act, other authorities or funding mechanisms may be available depending on the specific circumstances and signatories involved.

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