



# NATIVE CDFI NETWORK 2023 SUMMIT



Photos: Sam Levitan for Native CDFI Network

## TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS

Native CDFI Network (NCN) hit a new peak with its fourth annual Policy and Capacity Building Summit on December 3-5 at the Hyatt Regency in Washington, DC.

The annual event drew a record 220 attendees and featured more than 50 speakers, including officials from 18 federal agencies, Congressional members, impact investors, philanthropic organizations, and thought leaders from around the country.

“This year’s summit highlighted a positive shift in how federal officials, donors and partners are engaging with Native CDFIs and tribal communities,” NCN CEO Pete Upton (Ponca) said. “Now, we need them to stand with us as we envision a future where Native communities are not just pursuing financial inclusion, but are actively pursuing financial opportunity.”

Here are 10 top takeaways from the more than two dozen discussions, panels, and fireside chats during NCN’s 2023 Summit.



**#1 - THE FUTURE OF THE NATIVE CDFI INDUSTRY IS BRIGHT – AND GREEN.** There was lots of buzz throughout the Summit about clean energy, increased federal funding, and the need to build the financial and operational capacity of Native CDFIs. In a Monday session, NCN's Kristen Wagner and consultant Ian Record talked about the historic effort to bring together 63 Native CDFIs and other qualified community lenders to submit the only Native-led, exclusively Native-serving Clean Communities Investment Accelerator application that could bring hundreds of millions to Indian Country. On Tuesday afternoon, in the final discussion of the Summit, Wagner and Record took the stage once again to talk new resources for Native CDFIs, including white papers, policy briefs, webinars, events and a new program called "Initiate Prosperity," an online business tool designed to support NCN members and business owners.

*"Everything we do is with the intention to support our Native CDFI members ... to make your jobs a little bit easier, to make your life a little bit easier and to get that capital flowing so you can do the important work that you do."*  
– Kristen Wagner, Native CDFI Network

**#2 - THE NEW COMMUNITY REINVESTMENT ACT (CRA) REGULATIONS ARE A GAME-CHANGER FOR INDIAN COUNTRY.**

The new CRA rules offer a promising framework for increased investment in Indian Country, according to Jesse Van Tol, President and CEO of National Community Reinvestment Coalition. But realizing its full potential will require sustained advocacy, collaboration among Native communities, and ongoing efforts to address the challenges of implementation and accountability. By actively engaging with the new regulations and building capacity, Native communities can leverage them to secure fairer and more equitable investment for their regions, he said.

*"CRA works when you do. It's a framework, and you can evaluate the framework to the degree to which it's helpful to you to promote investments in your communities, to create partnerships for your organization."*  
– Jesse Van Tol, National Community Reinvestment Coalition

**#3 - TREASURY IS LISTENING TO NATIVE CDFIS, PROBABLY MORE SO THAN EVER.** NCN CEO Pete Upton welcomed United States Treasurer Marilyn "Lynn" Malerba, Chief of the Mohegan Tribe, and Fatima Abbas (Haliwa Saponi) for a fireside chat about the U.S. Treasury's efforts in Indian Country. Unsurprisingly, Malerba's comments were not just a platitude-filled pep talk, but a strategic road map for bolstering economic development and prosperity in tribal communities. Throughout the 45-minute conversation, Malerba and Abbas, who serves as the first director of the Treasury's Office of Tribal and Native Affairs, shared specifics about the agency's initiatives to engage with Tribal Nations, remove roadblocks to capital, educate staff about Indian Country, and unleash the power of Native CDFIs.

*"We need to hear your voices ... not just in consultations, but throughout the process. Your expertise, your concerns, your vision – these are the ingredients for a truly equitable future. Sharing our stories, our successes, and our struggles is how we bridge the gap between policy and reality."* – Treasurer Chief Malerba, United States Treasury

*"There's a lot more capacity to make policy changes than it probably feels like on the outside. I know when I was on the outside, talking to federal agencies seemed to be a black hole. But we really do take all of your letters, all of your comments. We do push them upwards and, at least during this administration, we have seen a lot of willingness to revise programs. Just stay engaged with us."* – Fatima Abbas, United States Treasury

**#4 - ONE OF INDIAN COUNTRY'S "WELL-KEPT SECRETS" IS REINVENTING ITSELF AS IT TURNS 50**

Patrice Kunesh (Standing Rock Lakota), commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) talked about the agency's mission and evolving vision. Unlike top-down directives of the past, Kunesh emphasized ANA's commitment to tribal self-determination and investing in community-driven projects across the social, economic and environmental aspects of Indian Country. Native CDFIs are a priority partner of ANA, she said.

*"Native CDFIs make the most important investments and achieve the most impressive impacts in Native communities. They are directly responsible for enhancing financial fluency, for creating access to capital, or building homes, entrepreneurs and business. So it's just phenomenal, the work Native CDFIs do and quite simply, I think Native CDFIs are the best champions of Indian Country investments."* – Patrice Kunesh, Administration for Native Americans



**#5 - NATIVE CDFIS CAN PLAY A LEAD ROLE IN HELPING TRIBAL COMMUNITIES CAPITALIZE ON A ONCE-IN-A-GENERATION OPPORTUNITY.**

That was a key point of emphasis during a panel discussion on building a clean energy finance ecosystem through the \$27 billion Greenhouse Gas Reduction Act. Attorney Pilar Thomas (Pascua Yacqui) led the panel – consisting of Joel Blane of GRID Alternatives, Thomas Steirer (Seneca) of Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy, and Ravi Malhotra of ICAST – through a discussion that stressed the importance of aggregating projects and moving beyond individual household initiatives to projects that benefit the entire Native community. Comprehensive energy planning, integration of clean energy into broader development projects, and coordination with contractors were identified as critical steps for Tribal Nations to maximize the impact of clean energy initiatives.

*“Be ready for this wave in Indian Country; we have to ride that wave, and we have to grow our own to benefit from it.”  
– Thomas Steirer, Alliance for Tribal Clean Energy*

**#6 - IMPACT INVESTORS NEED FINANCIAL PARTNERS TO BRING TO BRING CLEAN ENERGY TO UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING TRIBAL LANDS.**

Krystal Langholz outlined the National Clean Investment Fund (NCIF) strategy of Climate United, a consortium of experienced, mission-driven lenders and investors that submitted an application for the \$14 billion clean energy program. Langholz said Climate United wants 60% of funds received directed to low-income and disadvantaged communities, exceeding the EPA’s 40% requirement. Of those funds, they are targeting 10% for tribal communities and Climate United has an overall aim to benefit 15 million Americans, create 200,000+ quality jobs, and provide sustainable housing for 250,000+ families.

*“We need partners and we want to be accountable to you all around these goals. And really ... we want this money to go to the places and people where it can directly benefit people’s lives.” – Krystal Langholz, Calvert Impact and Climate United*

**#7 - INDEPENDENT RESEARCH AND DATA ABOUT NATIVE CDFIS SHAPES PUBLIC POLICY.**

Casey Lozar (Salish-Kootenai) and Michou Kokodoko discussed initiatives and research about Native CDFIs conducted by the Center for Indian Country Development (CICD), a unit of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. The duo highlighted the CICD’s commitment to advancing economic self-determination for Tribal Nations, emphasizing the importance of data in informing public policy, particularly in advocating for initiatives that benefit Indian Country. The discussion touched on various research projects conducted by the CICD, focusing on Native CDFIs’ lending practices and their unique approaches to understanding loan risk and clients’ needs.

*“We don’t lobby and we don’t advocate. We are an independent institution, so all of our research and data work is meant to inform or contribute to good public policy. So what gets me excited about being on stage today with all of you is that, in many ways, it’s your opportunity. And it’s your responsibility to take some of the research that we do to really advocate (for Native CDFIs and your communities).” – Casey Lozar, Center for Indian Country Development*



**#8 - NATIVE CDFIS CAN BE – AND SHOULD BE – EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES FOR NATIVE BUSINESSES.** That was a key point made during a fireside chat with U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids (Ho-Chunk) (D-KS), Chris James (Eastern Band Cherokee), CEO of the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development, and Tribal Business News Editor Brian Edwards. Davids emphasized the importance of individuals and organizations in Indian Country engaging in advocacy and encouraging proactive communication with members of Congress about the innovative work happening in Native communities. James highlighted the importance of advocating for Native CDFIs and emphasized the need for Congress to prioritize and support these initiatives.

*“I often tell my colleagues that there’s innovative stuff happening in Indian Country. And I don’t mean innovative stuff just for Indian Country. I mean, there is innovative stuff happening in Indian Country that draws in elements of big-picture and long-term thinking that I think the mainstream our country does not have enough of ... and I really feel like there’s a lot that Indian Country has to offer (the entire country).” – U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids (D-KS)*

**#9 - NATIVE CDFIS HAVE STRONG BI-PARTISAN SUPPORT IN CONGRESS, BUT IT’S IMPORTANT TO KEEP WORKING ON THE RELATIONSHIPS.** NCN’s Upton welcomed U.S. Senators Tina Smith (D-MN) and Cynthia Lummis (R-WY) for a fireside conversation that delved into systemic barriers hindering access to capital for Native CDFIs and impeding business and infrastructure development. Both senators emphasized the unique challenges in Indian Country, such as substandard housing and overcrowding, highlighting the need for legislative solutions. They discussed their roles in committees and specific bills aimed at supporting Native CDFIs.

*“I think about this as building a relationship for the long-term, rather than just kind of diving in when there’s a crisis or when we’re trying to pass a bill and need that urgent information. When you have that kind of relationship, then you’re always able to be working better and smarter ... maybe we can get ahead of (the issues) a little bit.” – Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN)*

*“We consume a lot of time legislating and appropriating only to produce a product that you can’t use because it’s too restrictive or has too many strings attached. So please help us really understand how you can make use of these programs in a way that serves Indian Country in your specific state and the specific tribal needs of your Native CDFI. And then we can do a better job of making the legislation serve the communities you’re trying to serve.” – Sen. Cynthia Lummis (R-WY)*

**#10 - NATIVE CDFIS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN SUPPORTING RURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND EMPOWERING YOUNG FARMERS.** Indian Country agriculture advocate Janie Hipp (Chickasaw) led a panel discussion that underlined collaboration between farm credit institutions and Native CDFIs when it comes to helping farmers access credit, services and business skills. The panelists — Drew Mattison of AgriBank, Gary Matteson of The Farm Credit Council, Sandy Martini (Cherokee Tribe) of the Native American Agriculture Fund, and Tyler Fish (Muscogee-Creek/ Cherokee) of Farm Credit Administration — talked about resources they offer and the importance of building relationships, addressing regulatory challenges, and collaborating to improve capital access for Native American communities and producers.

*“I will sound the alarm bell because our (Native) farmers and ranchers need our help. They need it. (We need to) solve the capital access issues in our communities. The Native CDFIs that are in this room are the backbone of doing this. The backbone. Our only job is to bring value to you.” – Janie Hipp, Native Agriculture Financial Services*

