

Testimony
of
Crow Tribal Chairman, Carl Venne
Before the United States Senate Finance Committee

Senate Finance Committee Hearing on Methamphetamine Law Enforcement /Money
Laundering
September 12, 2006

Good Morning, Honorable members Committee Members. I bring you greetings from Crow Country. My name is Carl Venne and I serve as Chairman of the great Crow Tribe of Indians, the Apsaalooka Nation. I was elected as Crow Tribal Chairman in November 2002 and I serve as an Advisory Council Member of the Montana Meth Project. I have more than three decades of experience serving in various tribal government roles. The majority of my professional experience has been as a police officer and law enforcement official, after obtaining a degree in law enforcement from the University of Minnesota at St. Paul.

The Apsaalooka Nation, often referred to as the Crow Reservation, is located in south-central Montana with the Wyoming state line as the southern border. Crow County includes over 2.5 million acres with its northwestern boundary approximately ten (10) miles from Billings, the largest city in the State of Montana. The Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs ("BIA") Law Enforcement is responsible for covering 184 interstate miles and 3,500 road miles.

The Crow (Apsáalooke) Tribe of Indians has a membership of approximately 11,000, of whom 7,900 reside on the Crow Indian Reservation. Eighty-five percent speak Crow as their first language. The tribe calls itself "Apsaalooke," which means "children of the large-beaked bird." The Crow people, throughout the periods of various social change, have found strength and stability through cultural preservation. However, this strength and stability of the proud Crow people has met a new and dangerous enemy.

Crystal Methamphetamine (“Meth”) has become the number one threat to our Tribal communities. As Native Americans, we honor our families, culture, and clan system and traditional values, but our greatest resource is our children. The Crow children affected by this devastating drug hold the future of our Crow Nation. These children are crying for help, but we cannot always hear their cry. With this in mind, the Crow Tribe has declared War on Meth. Meth has violated our communities destroying lives, affecting school systems, undermining social values, affecting employers, taxing the health care system, and taxing the law enforcement and social workers. There is no entity or organization on the Crow Reservation that is exempt from the devastating destruction of Meth. The Crow Tribal Rural Domestic Violence Program reported that from January 2005 to 2006, 76 adults and 127 children were referred, and of these numbers, 75% of the referrals were meth related.

Within the last 10 years, meth has flourished on the Crow reservation like a plague. Devastatingly, our Crow people have created a Crow language term to identify meth, “Baāchialiche”, which means white stuff due to its abundance in our Reservation culture. Meth has no discrimination to age, educational status, religion, or financial status. Instead, meth uses an individual’s weaknesses and strengths to maintain a presence within our communities. Using the strength of our family values, many non-Crow’s marry a Crow woman, which guarantees the individual a bond with the family and communities. Drug distributors have found a loop that allows them unlimited trafficking access on the Crow Reservation as well as other Tribal communities. The easy accessibility of transporting drugs through Interstate-90 and US Highway 212 has made the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Reservation easy targets for drug trafficking. The BIA Law Enforcement has responded to 23,995 calls for service to I-90, 95% were drug or alcohol related.

The consequence of this drug has been the death of many young adults. In 2005, there were five suicides on the Crow Reservation all were related to meth use. In 2006 on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, there were three suicides in one week all of which were related to meth use. On average there is an average of 1 – 2 suicide attempts a week on

the Crow Reservation. The Crow people cannot wait for another organization to fix the Meth Epidemic that exists on our reservation, but we know we cannot fight this fight alone. The government, state and local agencies must combine efforts to fight the War on Meth. One recovering addict stated. “The worst part of using is coming down, life is not worth living for when you are in this zone, if you can image the worst feeling in the world that is how you feel, not even the smile of your own child can make you happy”.

The meth dealers use the jurisdiction to their advantage. They move frequently on and off the reservation, from the reservation to reservation border towns and local cities. Big Horn County has not provided any relief to the drug problem on and near the reservation. The BIA Law Enforcement resources, which has jurisdiction on the reservation are spread thin. In 2005, the Crow BIA Law Enforcement covered 2.5 million acres of land with 10 police officers and 1 guard. The total Indian Country law enforcement in Montana serviced 63,592 people with 138 sworn police officers at a ratio of 2.17 officers per 1,000 people covering 9.5 million acres of reservation land. The challenges we face on the Crow Reservation are not having adequate personnel to address the drug problems that exist on the reservation. Because of the staff shortage the BIA Law Enforcement are reactive rather than being proactive. The local Law Enforcement is not able to apply their attention in even a moderate scale to the drug problem. The Crow Tribe funded a special agent position that works directly with the BIA Law Enforcement, FBI, and DEA, but this too is not enough.

To obtain adequate resource the local, city, and federal law enforcement must maintain better communication. FBI and DEA need to address all levels of distribution, not only the high level distributors, but also the low level street distributors that have a major impact on reservation communities and boarder towns. A liaison between all entities would improve the relationship and allow for better data sharing and information. Address jurisdictional barriers with border towns that have not joined the Safe Trails Task Force. Other needed resources;

- More Officers
- Training for officers in drug interdiction
- Surveillance equipment
- Vehicles
- Additional funding and resources for prevention activities
- Alternative Sentencing and Family Court
- Reservation boundary border control

On August 22, 2006 six government entities signed an agreement to form a drug task force that would focus on southeastern Montana's Indian Reservations. The Crow/Northern Cheyenne Safe Trails Task Force has formulized key players that will work fulltime on addressing drug trafficking on the Crow and Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservations. The organizations that participated in the signing ceremony include the Crow Tribe, Northern Cheyenne Tribe, Drug Enforcement Agency, Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Law Enforcement and Security, Colstrip Police Department. Each of the agencies has equal voice in the operation of the task force. Each agency will bring different resources to the table and the task force will be cross deputized to avoid jurisdictional barriers.

There are currently no mechanisms in place to share data and information from federal to local law enforcement entities. This has created a communication barrier, which also hinders the law enforcement's ability to track suspected drug dealers that travel from reservation to reservation. To improve the overall relation between all law enforcement agencies, there needs to be a data base to assist in tracking the drug dealers that are living on the reservation.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony before this honorable committee on a matter of critical importance to the Crow nation and to many other Native American communities. I believe the attention you have given this powerful enemy is a first step toward its defeat. Thank you.