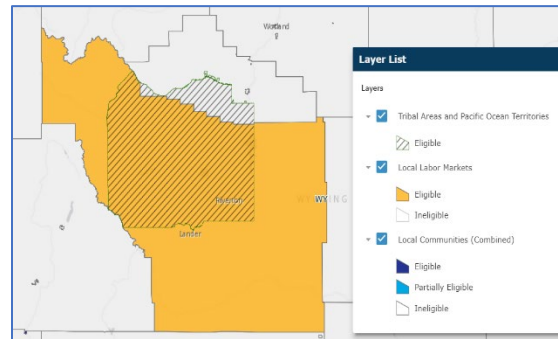


## EDA's FY2023 Distressed Area Recompete Pilot Program Recompete Plan for the Wind River Coalition: Creating a Sustainable, Indigenous-Based Economy in Wind River

Tribal Nations of the Great Plains region were once self-sufficient and nomadic people who operated within dynamic, thriving economic systems based on complex trade routes spanning the North American continent. As the population of white settlers grew in the late 1800s, federal policy forced Native people onto reservations and attempted to assimilate them by eliminating their traditional languages, food sources, and culture. These policies disrupted Native trade ecosystems by forcing indigenous groups to the fringes of society and confining them to remote, isolated land bases. In the years following, federal policy continued to strip Native communities of assets through the expropriation of lands and natural resources. Native individuals, families, and communities have endured *structurally-induced economic disparities* for over 130 years.

### Geographic Eligibility

According to the Recompete Eligibility Mapping Tool, the Riverton Micropolitan Statistical Area – the same geographic area as Fremont County, WY – is designated as a “Local Labor Market” and the Wind River Indian Reservation is located within a “Tribal Area.” As shown in the map, there is significant overlap in the regions. In fact, 65% of the county's population live within the boundaries of the reservation.<sup>1</sup> For this application, Wind River Development Fund, the lead applicant, is designating both geographies as its service area.



### Description of the Region

Fremont County ("Riverton Micropolitan Statistical Area") and the Wind River Indian Reservation are located in west-central Wyoming. Fremont County is the second largest county in Wyoming with 9,266-square miles making the county larger than eight U.S. states. The reservation, centered in Fremont County, contains 2.2 million acres and is the same size as Yellowstone National Park. Wind River Reservation is home to the Northern Arapaho Tribe and the Eastern Shoshone Tribe.

Fremont County has a population of approximately 40,000 people. Most of the county's population is centered in the towns of Riverton (10,587 people) and Lander (7,550 people). Riverton is located within the boundaries of the reservation and Lander is located just 1-2 miles outside of the reservation. Over 16,400 Native Americans live within the reservation boundaries. At 25.2 years, the median age of the local Native American population is significantly younger than the total population (34.5 years) in the county. The per capita income for Native Americans in Wind River is 43% below that of the county and 54% below the per capita income for the United States. Only

<sup>1</sup> Census Reporter, Wind River Indian Reservation, ACS 2021 5-year

10.3% of Native adults in Wind River had bachelor's degrees (or higher) compared to 18.2% for all races within the reservation and 37.9% of adults in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, our Native community is younger, less educated, more likely to be unemployed, they make less money, own fewer businesses and earn less money from them, have less wealth, and are less likely to own their homes compared to the general population.

### **The Wind River Coalition**

The Wind River Development Fund (WRDF), the *lead applicant* on the Recompete Plan, is a certified Native Community Development Financial Institution (Native-CDFI) that was originally chartered under the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. Today, WRDF is a separately designated, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization located in Fort Washakie, WY in the heart of the reservation. The organization has a Native-led board and all-Native staff. WRDF is also a founding member of the Mountain Plains Regional Native CDFI Coalition – recipient of a \$45 million EDA Build Back Better award – that is fortifying the indigenous finance industry in the mountain plains region.

The Wind River Coalition includes the Wind River Development Fund, Northern Arapaho Tribe, Eastern Shoshone Tribe, Shoshone and Arapaho Tribal Game and Fish, Wind River Job Corps, Wind River Food Sovereignty Project, Wind River Visitors Council, and Central Wyoming College. This native-led, native-focused coalition is best positioned to propose a new paradigm for revitalizing Fremont County and the Wind River tribal community.

The Coalition will also leverage its strong partnerships at the local, regional, state and national levels. Coalition members have excellent relationships with the Mountain Plains Coalition, Wyoming Business Council, University of Wyoming, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Wind River Family and Community Health Care, Wyoming Housing Network, and the Native CDFI Network. The Coalition members and other supporting entities understand regional conditions and the immediate economic needs in Fremont County and, specifically, on the reservation.

### **Unique Challenges Facing Wind River and the Need to Establish Economic Building Blocks**

The Wind River Coalition and its Recompete Plan envision a new day of economic prosperity in Fremont County and on the Wind River Indian Reservation. Native people, including those in Wind River, are living the effects of historic lack of investment into systems critical for thriving economies. The Plan reimagines an indigenous-based approach to overcoming persistent economic distress and systemic economic and racial barriers.

Clearly, traditional economic strategies have not worked across Indian Country. The solution, therefore, cannot be a one-dimensional approach to creating jobs and providing job training. Instead, this plan embraces a **holistic, indigenous approach** to creating a resilient and diverse economy in Fremont County and across the Wind River Basin.

The Recompete Plan identifies innovative strategies to create a new, equitable economic model that overcomes long-standing racial and systemic barriers. These barriers include:

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<sup>2</sup> Reservation Profiles, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, based on census data from 2013-2017.

**Systemic Poverty** – The Dawes Act of 1887, the Allotment Act of 1887, and the Homestead Act of 1962 systematically excluded and denied Native American households from land ownership, wealth generation, business ownership, and homeownership. These actions created and perpetuated a state in which **Native households own only eight cents (\$0.08) of wealth for every dollar owned by a white household.**<sup>3</sup> The result is persistent poverty across multiple generations.

**Land Sovereignty / Trust Land** – The complex land issue on the Wind River Reservation remains a significant impediment to housing, business creation, growing an indigenous economy, and generating intergenerational wealth. Most of the reservation is held in "trust" by the federal government. Trust land is intended to be held for the benefit of American Indians; however, the system creates a complex and uncertain governance of assets because trust land cannot be easily sold, collateralized, or developed. The Allotment Act and the creation of "fractionalized" land have further complicated land ownership. As a result, accumulating family wealth through the appreciation of real estate – a common wealth-building tool among white households – is often not available for many Native people living on a reservation.

**Economic Leakage** – Multiple studies have shown the high percentage of economic leakage leaving Native communities in the mountain plains region (WY, MT, SD, ND). A study by the Mountain Plains Coalition estimated that over \$346.4 million is leaving Native communities in the region. With such a rich land base and young workforce, the reservation is suited to contribute to the state's economy; however, the basic building blocks for a thriving economy do not exist.

**Food Access** – Easy access to Native foods allows for the restoration of physical health and overall better mental well-being among Native communities. Access to indigenous foods is also a key factor in achieving tribal sovereignty. The Wind River Indian Reservation is a designated food desert. The reservation is very large and residents must travel significant distances to get access to affordable food. A tribal member living in Fort Washakie, for example, must drive 33 miles to the Walmart in Riverton. Due to the long winters, the growing season is short and access to fresh, local fruits and vegetables is currently limited to just a few months in the summer.

**Lack of Access to Capital** – Many traditional financial institutions, which are constrained by inflexible underwriting standards, do not deploy capital on the reservation. Even though Native Americans represent 2% of the total U.S. population, large U.S. foundations give, on average, only 0.4% of their total annual funding to Native American communities and causes. To put it simply, without capital, growth is impossible.

**Cultural Preservation** – *Culture is the most important factor holding Native communities together.* Given the historical issues discussed previously, many Tribes and Native communities are struggling to maintain their cultural identities, languages, beliefs, and traditions. A cohesive and vibrant Native culture is an essential building block to creating a sustainable Tribal economy. The Tribes in Wind River lack the appropriate facilities in which to center their cultural identities, build more cohesive communities, and generate the funds to sustain their people.

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<sup>3</sup> Native Households Make 8 Cents for Every Dollar a White Household Has, National Indian Council on Aging, Inc., April 5, 2021

In the end, this Recomplete Plan and its corresponding economic investment will lead to *economic sovereignty* on the reservation. The Wind River Coalition believes that the projects outlined in this plan will create a new day of economic prosperity.

### **Leveraging Regional Assets to Build a Thriving Native Economy**

**Land Base** – With 2.2 million acres, the Wind River Indian Reservation has the potential to be the greatest resource for the local economy, but it is underutilized. By developing innovative solutions to overcome land constraints while balancing the protection of this sacred resource, the Coalition will leverage land as an asset to help Native individuals move from surviving to thriving.

**Agriculture** – Wyoming agriculture is the state’s third largest economic sector, contributing \$1.7 billion to the state’s economy. According to a study conducted for Fremont County in 2019, the four core industries identified (food, beef, equine, and agritourism) can have a catalytic impact to transform communities to be more vibrant and to attract and retain tourists and entrepreneurs.<sup>4</sup>

**Indigenous Culture** – The Wind River Indian Reservation is the second most searched term for travelers wanting to visit Wyoming (Yellowstone is #1). Visitors from around the world want to learn about the cultures, languages, and traditions of the Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone people. The Tribes also want to share aspects of their culture and educate others, but they lack the proper facilities to provide this immersive and authentic experience. The Tribes also want to repatriate their own artifacts and ancestral remains, but again, the proper facilities are not available.

**Tourism** – The Wind River Reservation is the same size as Yellowstone National Park – the country’s oldest national park. Economists for the national park estimated that visitors in 2021 spent \$834 million in nearby communities and supported over 8,700 jobs.<sup>5</sup> Based on statistics from the Wind River Visitors Council, tourism generated \$167 million of economic impact (2022) in Fremont County, *but a small fraction of that money was captured on the reservation.*

**Ecotourism** – The Wind River Reservation is 2.2 million acres of pristine wilderness with 1,100 miles of streams and 265 lakes. The area boasts some of the best fly fishing and hunting in the world, along with climbing, hiking, mountain biking, rafting, and camping. Recently, representatives from across the reservation met for the Intertribal Tourism Summit. The result was general consensus of the opportunity to develop an ecotourism model that allow access to these natural resources while carefully protecting tribal interests.

The model works: Ecotourism is supporting local economies like Lander, WY, which is located just outside of the reservation. Sinks Canyon State Park attracted almost 400,000 visitors in 2019. The canyon and adjacent town are known for world class rock climbing and is the site of the International Climbers’ Festival every year. At a recent economic development conference, the town reported that climbers generated \$4.5 million of economic activity in the most recent year. Many climbers who have visited Lander over the years decided to stay and have started 11 businesses in the town and now employ 115 FTEs and generate \$17.5 million in economic impact.

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<sup>4</sup> Ag Strategies for Diversifying Agriculture in Fremont County and Central Wyoming, Orbis Advantage, Inc., 2019

<sup>5</sup> Tourism to Yellowstone creates \$834 million in economic benefits; Report shows visitor spending supports 8,736 jobs in local economy, National Park Service, June 29, 2022

**Washakie Hot Springs** – Located in Fort Washakie, the natural hot spring is centrally located on the reservation and is a convenient spot for both residents and visitors. The hot spring, also known as the Chief Washakie Plunge, was open and attracting visitors until the adjacent building fell into disrepair and the hot springs facility closed in 2010. By comparison, nearby Big Horn Hot Springs State Reserve in Thermopolis became Wyoming’s first state park in 1897. Thermopolis has multiple hot springs that attracted nearly 1.9 million visitors in 2019. These visitors support restaurants, bars, retail stores, hotels, and campgrounds. This area was once owned by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes and is now leveraged by the state park system to generate economic activity *off the reservation*.

**Entrepreneurship** – One of the core tenants of the Coalition is a shared understanding of the vital roles that Native American entrepreneurship and the private business economy play in driving tribal and regional economic growth. Small business development and entrepreneurial investment are key drivers of economic growth. While they may be systematically isolated from the broader economy, indigenous communities are home to many small businesses and entrepreneurs who possess the tenacity and innovation needed to invigorate a thriving economy in the region.

### **Component Projects: Developing an Equitable, Sustainable, and Resilient Native Economy**

The Wind River Coalition has developed innovative solutions to successfully strengthen the economic development building blocks in Fremont County and on the reservation. Through the set of proposed projects, Coalition members will leverage their knowledge and their extended network of partners, and additional investments to catalyze economic growth in the region. (Please see Attachment – Leveraging Funding Streams to Amplify the Reconnect Plan’s Impact.) Measurable outcomes in job creation, wage growth, workers placed in quality jobs, reduced unemployment, and increases in Native- and women-owned businesses will ultimately close the racial wealth gap.

### **Project 1 – Cultural Preservation and Tourism**

The vision for Project 1 is to create a new cultural preservation center to protect, preserve and curate the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho cultures, languages, artifacts, music, and art. The center will include space for Native artisans and a recording studio to capture storytelling, music, and songs. The center will feature and teach about Native farming, ranching and food production, and offer courses on tanning, making indigenous clothing, and creating Native meals. In addition to the cultural aspects, this new tourism opportunity will attract a constant flow of visitors driving to and from Yellowstone and those seeking to learn more about Native Americans. This new focal point on the reservation will be the genesis of a robust private sector, including restaurants, cafes, retail stores, an RV park, and other recreational, consumer-facing businesses. A comprehensive wayfinding program will be essential to directing visitors to the site(s) and managing the traffic volume.

The entire project will create significant economic activity and jobs in the prime age group. Economists for the National Park Service carefully analyze the economic impact of Yellowstone each year. Using this as a model and with the infrastructure in place on Wind River, the Coalition estimates capturing 10%-15% of the Yellowstone tourism volume. This level of activity alone would result in \$83 million to \$125 million of economic activity and the creation of 870-1,305 jobs in Fremont County.

## **Project 2 – Ecotourism**

The vision for Project 2 is to expand ecotourism opportunities on the reservation while carefully managing the natural environment. An ecotourism leadership group is already in place, including many of the same organizations that provided letters of support. WRDF is a finalist in the ERC/EDA Fellowship Program and if selected as a host site WRDF will dedicate this professional to the ecotourism project for the next 2½ years.

The group is working with Indifly, a non-profit organization, to find a location for and construct a fly-fishing lodge on the reservation. The lodge will attract enthusiasts from around the world and is expected to create jobs in the 25-54 age range, including construction, fishing guides (who earn approximately \$60,000 per year), and hospitality services. These fly fishers, who are generally high net worth individuals, will also support local restaurants, retail stores, and Tribal businesses.

Project 2 includes an expanded Tribal Fish and Game office to effectively manage the 2.2 million acres. Currently, the program has only four positions and is responsible for law enforcement, educational programming, search and rescue, and animal agriculture management. This expansion will facilitate broader economic development and support growing private sector jobs in the target range. The project will support new Native-owned businesses and create opportunities for Native guides and outfitters for hunting, mountain biking, hiking, and guided photography trips. To facilitate the increase in visitors, this project also includes infrastructure improvements, including parking areas, trailheads, trail development and maintenance, shelters, restroom facilities, and signage.

As discussed earlier, the Big Horn Hot Springs Park attracted 1.9 million visitors in 2019 and Sinks Canyon attracted 400,000 visitors; both locations are located just outside of the reservation. The Wind River Visitors Council's Annual Report (2022) estimates that each visitor trip, on average, generates \$644 of spending in the area and that \$92,399 of spending supports one FTE. Using these statistics, an increase of 100,000 visitor trips on the reservation, which should be easily attainable, will generate \$64.4 million of spending and support almost 700 positions.

## **Project 3 – Developing Human Capital Through Workforce Development**

Project 3 focuses on developing human capital in the region through workforce development and wrap-around services. The Wind River Coalition and its extended network includes the Tribal Employment Rights Office (TERO), Wind River Job Corps, Central Wyoming College (CWC), Red Feathered Vocational Rehab, and other workforce services organizations. A culturally-relevant and equitable workforce development program will be developed and implemented to support the staffing needs of small businesses, health care facilities, and a growing private sector in Fremont County. This project will also expand workforce wrap-around services, such as childcare and transportation vouchers, that will be required to build and sustain a strong workforce. The project will focus on workforce development for the 25-54 age group and also, through the Job Corps and Central Wyoming College, ensure that the 16-24 age group is educated and trained to support ongoing job growth in the county. This will result in accelerated economic growth and place candidates in quality jobs in the region's economy. For example, a new assisted living facility is under construction in Lander – Table Mountain Living Community – and will require 20-30 full-time positions when it opens in early 2026. Morning Star Manor, located in Fort Washakie, is

currently in need of five registered nurses (RNs), 12 certified nursing assistants (CNAs), and four cooks. The Wyoming Life Resource Center in Lander recently completed an \$85 million expansion and reportedly needs to fill 100 new positions. In addition, both Tribes are expanding their health care facilities and programs requiring new FTEs.

#### **Project 4 – Land Sovereignty**

Project 4 focuses on developing new solutions to overcoming the significant economic barrier of land access on the reservation. This project will develop innovative models for acquiring and leasing land and utilize project funding to build an *Indigenous Land Reserve Bank* for near-term economic development. Because of the challenges of finding land on the reservation suitable for development – a frequent barrier to entrepreneurialism – the Land Reserve Bank initiative will proactively seek to acquire land for future jobs-creating projects. This effort will simplify the business development process and reduce the time for startups, expansions, and job creation. Project 4 is an important **leading/enabling strategy** and integral to the entire Recompete Plan. Success with this project will also establish an important economic building block on the reservation and return land sovereignty to Native people.

#### **Project 5 – Food Sovereignty and a Robust Agricultural Economy**

Food sovereignty and an indigenous-focused agricultural economy are critical to the health and well-being of Native people. Nationally, the Native American Agriculture Fund estimates that there could be a potential recapture/claiming of \$45.4 billion dollars by investing in Native food hubs, which would surpass the Indian gaming industry (\$33 billion). Native food hubs operate complete systems including farm production, food processing, packaging, wholesale trade, retail trade, food services, energy, finance and insurance, and advertising.

Project 5 will focus on expanding access to native foods and healthy food options on the reservation and creating jobs to support this critical industry. The project will include a Native food ecosystem, a local food cooperative, support for the Wind River Food Sovereignty Project's Trout Creek Farm (in development), developing incubator space for food-related businesses, and starting a Native-focused culinary training program. As the private sector grows on the reservation, this project will support restaurants, hotels, and cafes to reduce economic leakage. In addition, the project will continue helping Native farmers, ranchers, and producers expand production and increase wages and jobs.

#### **Project 6 – Health Care**

Without physically and mentally healthy citizens a community cannot thrive. Project 6 will focus on supporting the expansion of critical health care programs, services, and facilities on the reservation. To meet the needs of the reservation, this project will enable the creation and expansion of wellness and care centers, health care technology, substance use disorder programs and facilities, hospice care, and the entire spectrum of services. This project will work together with Project 3 – Human Capital to ensure that the workforce is properly trained for each job and that the appropriate wrap-around services are in place to contribute to success.

#### **Project 7 – Coalition Governance**

Effective coalition governance is critical to the Recompete Plan's success. The Coalition will have to navigate a particularly complex and unique situation *different from any other reservation community*: Fremont County and the reservation are governed by two sovereign Nations and three levels of government (county, state, federal). These five entities have not always worked well together for many historical and structural reasons. Project 7 will build the governance and systems component of the region's ecosystem by fostering thought leadership, encouraging collaboration, and leading strategic planning, data collection, and research initiatives.

Additional responsibilities include: Expand upon the regional blueprint for sustained economic growth with a specific focus on the prime age employment gap and increasing wages; strategically distribute financial and non-financial investments across the projects and catalyze the impact on the individual/organizational and the collective/regional level; evaluate successful economic growth strategies within the region and conduct research to identify potential sources of capital investments to complement the Implementation Grant; and recruit the Recompete Plan Coordinator (RPC). Under the direction of the Executive Director of WRDF and in collaboration with the Coalition governance, an RPC job description will be developed, the Coalition will utilize its combined networks to identify potential candidates, and the Coalition will be involved in the interviews and final selection of the RPC.

### **Sustainability and Outcomes**

The combined impact of the seven, complementary projects, working together and funded by the Implementation Grant (and other large funding streams), will break the persistent cycle of economic distress in the region and generate an estimated 1,500-2,000 jobs focused in the 25-54 age range. Given the need to make significant investments in the region's economic building blocks, the growth in jobs will take time to fully mature. This plan has demonstrated, using excellent illustrative models in neighboring communities, that the potential for success and significant economic growth are within reach.

### **Conclusion**

Across many, if not most, reservations in the United States, traditional (i.e., colonial) economic systems and theories have failed. Continued attempts to *impose* these systems on indigenous cultures will provide the same results: decades of poverty, poor living conditions, lack of good-paying jobs, and the inability to build intergenerational wealth. At its worst, these "systems" have created historical trauma, structural and systemic racism, and a feeling of despair. Only through systems change, driven and led by Native people, with significant investments like the EDA's Implementation Grant, will we have the chance to break these persistent and pervasive cycles of economic distress.

The Wind River Coalition's Recompete Plan is different. But it must be big, bold, and impactful to break this cycle. From cultural centers, a new ecotourism model, entrepreneurial and workforce training, and regenerative food systems and agricultural investments, the Wind River Coalition will build a robust foundation of equity and wellness for its community. This must happen now – we cannot wait decades and hope for change – we must create the change that is desperately needed in our community today.