

# Indian Country Today

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## Galanda: Buy Indian. What are we waiting for?

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This year we “celebrate” the 100th anniversary of the [Buy Indian Act](#). Under that federal law, the Department of Interior and its agencies “shall” employ Indian labor and purchase “the products of Indian industry.” Over the last 100 years, however, the United States’ record of buying Indian has been less than stellar.

It took the BIA until 1976 to adopt the procurement policy that “all [BIA] purchases or contracts be made or entered into with qualified Indian contractors to the maximum practicable extent.” In 1980, the Supreme Court put a dent in the act’s Indian labor provision in [Andrus v. Glover](#). Congress partially repaired that dent in 1982, when it affirmed the buy Indian labor mandate with regard to federal road construction projects. Still, by the early 1990s, it was reported to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee that Interior agencies were overwhelmingly awarding construction contracts to non-Indian businesses. Thanks in part to President Bush Sr., Congress twice failed to pass amendments to strengthen the act.

Today, while there is mixed opinion as to whether Interior employs Indian labor whenever practicable, tribal entrepreneurs report that the United States’ record of purchasing the products of Indian industry remains abysmal. After 100 years of Buy Indian nonfeasance within every federal government branch, we must acknowledge that the act is ineffectual. The act will never be fully honored federally. Buy Indian must be realized tribally.

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In the spirit of Indian self-determination, *it is time for Indian country to buy Indian*. In fact, as self-determination remains our watchword, do we really need the U.S. to finally buy Indian? Certainly we want federal

purchasing power devoted to tribal businesses but we wield \$26 billion of our own purchasing power thanks to Indian gaming. We can now do it – Buy Indian – ourselves.

Sadly, Indian country's record of buying tribal products is also woeful. Tribal Employment Rights Offices have taken hold but tribal procurement of Indian products remains sorely lacking. The tribal seeds of self-determination planted in the 1910s and cultivated throughout and since the 1970s are now sprouting up everywhere, in the form of tribal enterprises and Indian small businesses and their goods and services. To give a few examples: [Sister Sky](#), a business owned by two Spokane sisters, manufacturers hygiene products made from traditional Indian botanicals, which they sell at shopping malls and to hotels and spas. [Yakama Juice](#), America's first Native-owned juice plant, produces organic juices that are fine enough for Costco to sell wholesale, as well as purified water and sports drinks. Indians throughout the Pacific Northwest harvest and sell some of the finest wild salmon, oysters and crab in the world.

Still, at virtually every Indian casino, hotel or resort in America, the bathroom products are furnished by the likes of Cisco, not Sister Sky; the beverages are provided by Coke or Pepsi, not Yakama Juice; and the farmed salmon is supplied by non-Indian fishermen. Tribal casino and hospitality management, who are predominately non-Indian, do not intuitively understand the notion of Buy Indian, and tribal leadership are typically too busy to teach or mandate Buy Indian. This all must change.

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We must buy Indian products and services in order to create a vibrant reservation private sector. According to "[Rebuilding Native Nations](#)," "Small business activity has a tremendous psychological and emotional impact on reservation people, particularly reservation youth. When they see businesses sprouting up, they see hope for the future." Yet without an Indian business sector, not only does our communities' hope for economic prosperity languish, but money representing that chance of prosperity perennially flows off of the reservation, and into non-

tribal communities.

In economics, a “spending multiplier” is the notion that an initial infusion of monetary spending leads to increased consumption spending, and in turn an increase in national income that is greater than the initial amount of spending. In Indian country, tribes and casinos spend money on goods and services provided by, for example, Cisco.

Cisco takes that Indian money with it off the reservation, where it spends that cash on non-Indian products and labor needed to run its businesses. Because Cisco passes those tribal dollars into the hands of other non-Indians, the income of the non-tribal community multiplies. However, the wealth of the Native nation with which Cisco does business remains stagnant. That is why some scholars call tribal economies “leaking economies.” Because Indian country does not buy from its own businesses and people, Indian money gushes off the reservation.

Without a vibrant tribal private sector, Indian job opportunity will be lost. The “Indian brain drain” – the leaking of tribal talent from the reservation – will continue. Reinvestment in tribal businesses and homes, and the modernization of reservation infrastructure, will not happen.

Opportunities to diversify tribal economies away from cigarettes, fireworks and gaming, towards more sustainable industries, and for tribes to tax Indian business activities to enhance governmental programs and services, will never flourish. Tribal quality of life – for example, not having to drive hours to go shopping – will not improve. Indian sovereignty and self-determination will never fully be realized.

So, in order to build and sustain a tribal private sector, what can your tribe do to start buying Indian goods and services? Your tribe should pass a *Tribal Buy Indian Act*.

Consider the [Hoopa Tribal Comprehensive Business Policy Code](#), which provides: “The Tribe recognizes that a strong Reservation economy must include both tribal and private sector

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development. It is the policy of the Tribal Council to promote both tribal and private sector development within the exterior boundaries of the Reservation and elsewhere within the jurisdiction of the Tribe.” Those most critical words, “it is the policy of the Tribal Council,” make Buy Indian the law of Hoopa.

What’s more: “It is the policy that Hoopa Tribal Governmental purchasing power generated by both tribal and other funds be used to support local businesses and that every effort be made by Tribal departments to purchase from local vendors and businesses. ... [W]ritten documentation must be submitted along with a request for non-local purchases which explain why it is not feasible to make such purchase(s) locally.” Therein lies the much-needed tribal Buy Indian mandate, declared from atop the Hoopa tribal government, down to tribal and casino managers. Forcing those tribal managers who wield a tribe’s purchasing power, to justify to tribal leadership why the tribe cannot buy Indian, creates accountability. Without that accountability, Buy Indian fails and our hope for a vibrant tribal private sector falters.

Buy Indian. What are we waiting for?

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