Program Fraud Review

IIJA Awards to the White Mountain Apache Tribe

Program Fraud Unit

The Office of Inspector General established the Program Fraud Unit (PFU) to assess fraud risk and investigate allegations and indications of fraud within the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). PFU conducts program fraud risk assessments and program fraud reviews:

Program Fraud Risk Assessment
An assessment of a broad program area intended to identify targeted areas for a more focused review.

Program Fraud Review
A targeted review of an entity, program, office, procurement, grant, cooperative agreement, or other financial agreement between DOI and another party. The review is intended to identify fraud indicators and risks through a defined scope.

What We Reviewed

We initiated a review of Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) awards from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Fort Apache Agency (Agency) to the White Mountain Apache Tribe (Tribe) Forest Management & Protection Program (Tribal Forestry) for hazardous fuels reduction (HFR) projects. HFR projects remove excess vegetation such as grasses, shrubs, trees, and dead plant material to decrease the intensity, danger, and spread of wildfires.

We opened our review after engaging with the White Mountain Apache Tribe and learning of its extensive HFR program. Following the outreach, we identified several areas of concern, including staffing limitations and the potential for improper awards. Our field work focused on HFR projects on the White Mountain Apache Reservation that were funded through IIJA between 2021 and 2025. Our purpose was to determine whether BIA and the Tribe followed established procurement processes for IIJA awards, and to identify any potential vulnerabilities in the award processes.

What We Found

We did not find evidence of fraud, waste, or mismanagement in the projects we reviewed, nor did we identify any violations of applicable procurement processes.

We did, however, identify potential understaffing at both the Agency and at the Tribe as a contributing risk factor for award management and oversight. The Indian Self Determination office (ISD) has only two staff to service over 50 contracts for two Tribes, and currently the Agency has no Silviculturist to provide input and approve future annual HFR and forest management plans. Similarly, at the White Mountain Apache Tribe, the high turnover rate in the Grants and Contracts office contributed to the delay in submitting $3.5 million in HFR reimbursement requests. By not submitting reimbursement requests in a timely manner, the Tribe is at risk of losing these IIJA funds, meaning the funds may not be available to compensate the Tribe for completed HFR projects.