Re-Establishing American Indian Tribe Sovereignty in the U.S.

Submitted By: SH Housing Solutions



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Tejon Indian Tribe

Organization Type: U.S. Federally Recognized Tribal Nation

Website: https://www.tejonindiantribe.com/

Practice Details

Country(ies): United States of America

City(ies): Bakersfield, Elk Grove

Start Year: 2012 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Affordability & Financing
- Social Housing
- Housing & Climate Mitigation
- Housing, Land & Spatial Planning

Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

For centuries, Indigenous peoples in the U.S. have faced forced displacement and the systematic theft of their ancestral lands through broken treaties and federal termination policies. The Tejon Indian Tribe, descendants of the Kitanemuk people, were entirely removed from their homeland after the unratified 1851 treaty—land later privatized as Tejon Ranch. Similarly, the Wilton Rancheria Tribe was terminated in 1959 and left landless for decades. These losses destroyed traditional housing systems, kinship networks, and self-sustaining livelihoods. When federal recognition was finally restored, both tribes confronted new barriers: lack of land, housing, infrastructure, and policy frameworks for tribal-led sustainable development. The result is a profound housing deficit, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation that now demand not charity but justice through housing sovereignty and resilient community rebuilding.

Solution Developed

The Tejon and Wilton Rancheria Tribes are redefining housing as the foundation for sovereignty and sustainability. The Tejon Visioning Plan establishes a holistic framework for a 320-acre homeland integrating Community, Economy, and Ecosystem—housing, healthcare, and education anchored within a regenerative land and water system. The plan aims to provide multigenerational homes for 500+ households, supported by economic engines (Hard Rock Tejon, retail corridor) that reinvest locally. The Wilton Rancheria model complements this through equitable revenue-sharing and reinvestment from the Sky River Casino, funding affordable housing, wellness, and education. Innovations include: (1) culturally rooted housing design reflecting traditional knowledge; (2) circular economies linking water, energy, and food systems; and (3) phased growth aligning infrastructure with capacity and environmental restoration.

Implementation

Tejon Indian Tribe: 20+ year Implementation follows three interdependent phases outlined in the Tejon Visioning Plan.

1. Reclaiming Land: ecological restoration and reoccupation through hydrological repair, soil healing, and cultural engagement.
2. Fostering Growth: construction of essential services—elder housing, community health clinic, cultural center, and public safety facilities.
3. Collective Rising: expansion of mixed-income housing, education, and workforce spaces integrated with regenerative agriculture, storm-water reuse, and biodiversity corridors.

Wilton Rancheria Tribe: Since regaining federal recognition in 2009, the Tribe has reclaimed ≈77 acres of ancestral land placed into trust and launched the Elder Village Project, a 12-unit sustainable housing community with shared recreation and wellness spaces, developed with

the Northern Circle Indian Housing Authority. Complementary programs include home rehabilitation, rental and move-in assistance, and long-term facilities management rooted in energy-efficient and culturally responsive design.

Partnerships & Resources: MASS Design Group, SH Housing Solutions, NCIHA, federal (HUD/EPA) and local partners to align environmental restoration, affordable housing, and community resilience. Collectively, these initiatives will provide dignified, sustainable housing for 500+ households, forming living models of self-determined, climate-resilient Indigenous communities.

Enablers & Obstacles

Enablers: Federal reaffirmation and trust-land status allowed both tribes to plan and build self-determined, sustainable housing. Revenues from the Hard Rock Tejon and Sky River casinos now fund affordable and elder housing, education, and infrastructure. Partnerships with MASS Design Group, SH Housing Solutions, and the Northern Circle Indian Housing Authority integrate design, sustainability, and governance. Traditional Ecological Knowledge guides wetland restoration, water reuse, and native landscaping that strengthen cultural and climate resilience.

Obstacles: Multi-jurisdictional approvals and infrastructure gaps slowed progress, mitigated by early NEPA/EIS reviews, phased utilities, and local MOUs. Drought and water scarcity addressed through bioswales, retention ponds, and closed-loop systems. Financing barriers on trust lands overcome through gaming revenues, grants, and reinvestment.

Results & Impact

Both the Tejon Indian Tribe and Wilton Rancheria Tribe are demonstrating measurable housing and resilience impacts that link land restoration, community design, and social equity.

Quantitative Results:

Tejon's Visioning Plan sets a target to house 500+ households across 320 acres through mixed-income, multi-generational development. Early phases integrate elder housing, a community clinic, and workforce housing with wetland restoration, water reuse, and renewable energy systems. Wilton Rancheria's Elder Village provides 12 new sustainable homes with shared community facilities, complemented by rental and rehabilitation programs assisting dozens of low-income families.

Qualitative Results:

Both tribes report renewed cultural identity, restored governance capacity, and strengthened intergenerational connection through housing design rooted in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Long-Term Impacts:

Housing anchors economic diversification—casino and retail revenues are reinvested into housing, education, and health infrastructure—creating self-sustaining, circular economies. Ecological restoration, including watershed recovery and green corridors, advances climate adaptation and biodiversity. Together, these projects demonstrate how Indigenous housing sovereignty delivers inclusive, low-carbon, and resilient communities aligned with SDG 11 and SDG 10.

Replication & Scale Up

Similar housing-and-resilience models are being replicated by other U.S. tribes. The Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative and HUD documented multiple case studies where tribes integrate housing, culture, and land restoration. The Navajo, Pueblo of Acoma, and Yurok Tribes have launched sustainable housing villages combining renewable energy, cultural design, and local employment. These examples show how Indigenous-led, land-based housing frameworks can be adapted widely to restore sovereignty and community resilience.

This model can be scaled through policy and partnerships that empower tribes to plan and finance housing on reclaimed land. Federal recognition, trust-land restoration, and revenue reinvestment create replicable frameworks for sustainable housing tied to culture and ecology. By sharing design toolkits, TEK-based planning methods, and financing models, other tribes—and global Indigenous communities—can adapt this approach to build resilient, self-sustaining homelands.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has informed or been partially integrated into policy discussions, strategies, or pilot-level policy instruments.

The Tejon and Wilton housing frameworks are shaping policy dialogues on Indigenous planning, housing sovereignty, and sustainable development. Tejon's Visioning Plan informs local–federal coordination through NEPA and EPA resilience grants, while Wilton's HUD- and NCIHA-supported programs demonstrate tribal-led housing finance within state housing strategies. Both contribute to California and national discussions advancing land-back, trust-land housing, and climate-resilient tribal planning models.

Lessons & Takeaways

Early phases revealed the need for clearer coordination between tribal, county, and federal agencies to streamline approvals and funding. Future efforts will strengthen early community engagement, diversify financing beyond gaming revenues, and accelerate workforce housing delivery. Greater investment in technical training, intertribal knowledge exchange, and climate-adaptive infrastructure would further enhance long-term resilience and self-sufficiency.