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## **STANDING ROCK SIOUX TRIBE TESTIMONY ON FY 2027 APPROPRIATIONS**

### **COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES MARCH 18, 2026**

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 appropriations priorities of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Tribe). My name is Steve Sitting Bear and I serve as the Chairman of the Tribe. As a large land-base tribe, our infrastructure needs span our 2.3 million acre Standing Rock Indian Reservation, an area roughly the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. We have more than 16,588 enrolled members, over half of whom reside on the reservation, but we lack the basic infrastructure and funding needed to sustain our communities and foster economic opportunity.

Our ancestors signed Treaties with the United States in 1851 and 1868. Under Article VI, Clause 2 of the U.S. Constitution, our Treaties are the Supreme Law of the Land. Under these agreements, the United States is bound by a government-to-government Treaty and Trust Relationship with the Tribe. This relationship carries an unwavering federal obligation to ensure the protection of our lands, waters, and cultural resources.

While we appreciate the Subcommittee's ongoing efforts to maintain funding for Indian programs and services, the reality on the ground is that we are chronically underfunded. We lack the staff and resources needed to successfully administer the very programs designed to serve our people. We paid for these programs and services upfront through our Treaties with the United States. Congress must now provide the funding necessary to honor those Treaty and Trust obligations.

#### **LAND MANAGEMENT INFORMATION AND DATA**

One of my primary goals is to grow and diversify our economic portfolio through the development of a robust agricultural enterprise including re-establishing Standing Rock Farms and Ranch. This is designed to provide sustainable growth by cultivating high-value crops and providing managed

grazing for bison and livestock. However, implementation of this vision is fundamentally stalled by the failure of the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to maintain accurate and accessible land records and data.

This uncertainty is a direct legacy of the Federal government's failed allotment policies from the 1880's that dismantled our Reservation by dividing Tribal lands into individual parcels for Tribal Members and homesteading by non-Indians. This policy stripped our Tribe of millions of acres and when many homesteads failed during the 1930s, the Federal government purchased the land through bailout programs rather than restoring it back to the Tribe. The resulting "checkerboard" pattern continues to be a primary obstacle to Tribal governance and economic development.

To address the legacy of allotment and the barriers it creates for economic development, we need a modern approach to federal land management. This includes ensuring BIA has the staff and resources to digitize and make Indian land status information readily accessible to Tribal governments. The Trust Asset and Accounting Management System (TAAMS) needs to be modernized and information made accessible. Although our staff has been trained to use this database, we have yet to receive the necessary access from BIA. If the Federal government is committed to tribal economic self-sufficiency, it must fully fund these land programs and ensure that technical systems are user-friendly, up-to-date, and accessible to trained tribal personnel.

We are the best stewards of our homelands reserved in Treaty. However, given the impacts of allotment, we need land ownership and resource data to be readily available. This technology is critical for long-term strategic planning.

The "checkerboard" ownership pattern created by allotment of our lands is further complicated by the ongoing challenge of fractionated interests. Because individual allotments have been passed down through multiple generations, a single tract of land may now be owned by dozens or even hundreds of individual heirs. This fragmentation creates immense administrative hurdles, as the Tribe or an individual must obtain consent from a high percentage of these various owners to move forward with a project, even in cases where the Tribe already holds a majority interest. Navigating this complex web of permissions consistently delays or derails vital initiatives, ranging from large-scale agricultural operations to the expansion of modern energy and utility infrastructure.

A recent initiative intended to help Tribes gain ownership and consolidate interest over fractionated lands was the Cobell Land Buy-Back Program. The program aimed to consolidate nearly 116,000 fractional interests and approximately 230,000 equivalent acres on the Standing Rock Reservation. To date, we do not know which specific interests were consolidated through the program. One of my first actions as Chairman was to send an inquiry to the BIA requesting information on the location of all lands the Tribe owns or has an interest in. Four months later, I am still waiting for a response.

BIA needs staff and resources to respond to tribal inquiries in real time so that we can plan for our future. Another solution is to modernize TAAMs to ensure that it is user friendly and to ensure all

trained individuals can have same day access once they are adequately trained. BIA must also timely process probates so that land is not tied up and unusable for years.

The Tribe has spent significant time, money, energy, and staff resources attempting to gather basic land ownership information needed to support economic development and long-term planning. Unfortunately, our repeated efforts to obtain this information through the BIA has not produced the information that we need. Delays and inaction from BIA hinder our ability to move forward with economic development efforts that are essential to creating economic opportunity and building long-term self-sufficiency for our people.

Our ability to build a sustainable future depends on the Subcommittee providing BIA with the staff, resources, expertise and funding needed to modernize its land information systems. The Federal government's failed allotment policies created a legacy that we must now overcome. The Subcommittee cannot leave us with our hands tied behind our back by the legacy of allotment. To effectively manage our allotted and fractioned lands we need BIA reality staff with the resources and expertise to overcome this legacy.

### **MODERNIZING STANDING ROCK HEALTHCARE**

Our Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital at Fort Yates, constructed in 1962, is now more than 60 years old and is the oldest facility in the Great Plains IHS Area. This 34,000-square-foot structure is functionally inadequate and inefficient, consisting largely of used modular units passed down from other service units. With only one outpatient clinic serving our vast 2.3-million-acre reservation, our healthcare infrastructure is stretched beyond its capacity.

We lack basic lifesaving equipment and the physical condition of the facility compromises patient care. The roof leaks and chronic overcrowding undermines provider efficiency and patient privacy. During the winter, the antiquated boiler system struggles to maintain a safe temperature inside the building. The lack of modern infrastructure even extends to emergency logistics, where nurses are forced to use their cell phone lights to guide emergency helicopters landing on the road adjacent to our clinic. Our facility is failing to meet modern standards and safety codes.

The IHS facility also has a severe staffing and vacancy crisis. As of January 2026, we had 88 vacant full-time positions out of 194 authorized roles. With only 55 percent of the workforce filled it causes significant burnout for our permanent staff and forces us to heavily rely on high-cost contractors. We have vacancies in critical administrative roles, like coding, Health Information Management, and risk management, which impacts the Tribe's ability to collect third party revenue. A major hurdle for recruitment is the 50-mile commute, 36 current employees make that commute. We need on-site housing to increase employment recruitment.

To fulfill the Federal government's Treaty and Trust Responsibilities to provide healthcare to our Tribe, a new 187,116-square-foot facility is needed. This proposed facility, estimated at \$110,000,000, must be matched by an investment in the professionals who provide care. A facility of this scale requires approximately 400 employees, including 265 new full-time positions just to meet current community needs. Any new construction plan must eventually account for additional

staff quarters to attract and retain these providers. Investing in a new facility is the only way to ensure that preventable diseases are treated before they escalate into life-threatening conditions.

### **STRENGTHENING PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE**

Our public safety infrastructure is in a state of emergency. We have only seven officers working on our 2.3 million acre Reservation. Typically, we have only two officers on patrol. To recruit and retain officers, we must be able to offer competitive pay and provide on-site officer housing. Furthermore, the federal background check process must be streamlined to allow us to fill vacancies more efficiently.

We urge Congress to fund a BIA Police Academy in the Great Plains Region. There is only one Police Academy and candidates must travel nearly 1,200 miles to Artesia, New Mexico to attend.

The budgetary crisis extends into our judicial and detention systems. Our BIA-OJS detention center was constructed in 1960 and is physically deteriorating. Following an inspection in October 2021, the BIA recommended that the building be condemned and demolished. Despite this, we continue to utilize the same 48-bed facility that is consistently overcrowded at two to three times capacity. BIA-OJS is forced to contract bed space for long-term adult inmates in a facility that requires a 772-mile round trip from the reservation. This distance places an undue burden on families and detainees lose the community of support they need to recover.

### **SUPPORT FOR INDIAN EDUCATION**

The Federal government's Treaty and Trust commitment to provide for the education of our youth is being met with neglect. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the Rock Creek Grant School, where students are forced to learn in a facility that desperately needs to be updated. Portions of the school are over 120 years old, and even the "newer" additions have reached 40 years of age. While the BIA Office of Facilities, Property, and Safety Management officially rated the school's condition as "poor" following a 2020 assessment, there has been no follow-up.

The school currently operates with significant safety risks, including the total absence of a fire sprinkler system, outdated ventilation, and deteriorating windows and flooring. Furthermore, heating and energy insecurity remain constant threats to the learning environment. BIA estimates that \$21 million is needed, including \$7.8 million for immediate, critical repairs and \$13.2 million for necessary new construction. We urge the Subcommittee to prioritize these funds to ensure our students have a safe, modern environment that reflects the value we place on their future.

### **CONCLUSION**

The funding requests I have shared today represent a turning point for the Tribe. For too long, our growth has been stifled by the lasting legacy of failed allotment policies and the chronic underfunding of the very facilities meant to protect our health and safety. We are asking the United States to honor the promises made to our ancestors enshrined in the Treaties of 1851 and 1868. By restoring our lands, modernizing our hospital and schools, and empowering our law enforcement, the Subcommittee would be providing the foundation for self-sufficiency.