

Testimony Supporting Appropriations for Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Compliance

House Bill #1603

Date: 1-31-2025

Honorable Members of the Committee,

My name is James DeCoteau, and I am the cultural liaison to the Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, as well as the Vice Chairman of the Turtle Mountain NAGPRA Committee. I am here today to express the need for appropriations that will support compliance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in our North Dakota communities. As representatives of Indigenous peoples, we recognize the essential importance of honoring our ancestors and the cultural heritage that shapes our identity.

The proposed biennial allocation of \$5 million is not just a budgetary item; it is a significant commitment to justice and healing for Native American Tribes. This funding provides an opportunity to address historical injustices and ensures that our sacred artifacts and ancestral remains are treated with the dignity and respect they rightfully deserve.

****Tribal Consultation and Repatriation Activities****

The creation of designated funds for consultation is critical. This will enable North Dakota Tribes to engage effectively with museums and federal agencies throughout the repatriation process. Repatriation transcends the mere return of items; it encompasses the restoration of our histories and cultural integrity, allowing our communities to reconnect with their heritage and fostering ongoing conversations surrounding cultural preservation.

****State and Tribal Capacity Building****

Investing in the capacity of our state and tribal agencies is essential for fulfilling the goals of NAGPRA. Training and staffing allocations will support the development of effective management strategies and encourage collaboration. Equipped with the necessary resources, we can cultivate a future where our cultural items are preserved and honored within their rightful contexts.

****Grants for Museums and Cultural Institutions****

To foster a truly collaborative atmosphere, museums and cultural institutions must be prepared to navigate the complexities associated with NAGPRA compliance. Grants dedicated to enhancing inventory and repatriation processes will promote partnerships that emphasize the importance of Indigenous voices.

****Repatriation Timelines****

Establishing clear timelines for repatriation not only improves the efficiency of the process but also reflects respect for our cultural items and their significance within our heritage. This commitment conveys our dedication to addressing past injustices and prioritizing the needs of Native American communities.

****Priority Considerations****

I encourage you to prioritize initiatives that directly address the repatriation of significant cultural items. Providing meaningful consultation opportunities and assisting tribes in developing sustainable preservation plans will foster enduring relationships and an enhanced understanding of the pivotal roles our cultural items serve in our communities.

In summary, this appropriation represents a critical advancement towards justice and reconciliation. It allows us to honor our ancestors, protect our cultural heritage, and work towards a more equitable future. I urge you to support this bill, not only for the benefit of our Tribes but for the broader enrichment of our state.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,

James DeCoteau

Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians

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