

Letter to Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Officials

Háu Mitákuyepi,

We write to you with deep respect for your leadership and the sacred responsibility you carry on behalf of our people. The future of the Standing Rock Oyate depends on the survival of our Lakota and Dakota languages—the sacred breath that connects us to our ancestors, our ceremonies, and our sovereignty.

Our language is not just a tool for communication. It is our identity, our law, our way of life. It carries the songs of our ceremonies, the words of our prayers, and the teachings passed down through generations. It is through our language that we remain who we are.

For many years, our elders, leaders, and educators across Lakota and Dakota country have worked with vision and dedication to ensure that the voices of our ancestors would not be lost. They made sovereign decisions to share their knowledge, stories, and dialects—not for personal gain, but so that our children and grandchildren could inherit a living language.

It remains painful to see these contributions questioned or dismissed, as if our elders were misled. They were not. They acted with dignity, foresight, and love for all the people. When the late Councilman Jesse Taken Alive and the late Councilwoman Alma Mentz called for both Standing Rock's dialects to be included in the LLC dictionary and curriculum, they were exercising their responsibility as leaders to protect our way of speaking, distinct to our homelands.

Many elders opened their homes and hearts to support this work. They welcomed helpers — some from outside our Nation — Jan Ullrich, a linguist, came in good faith, not as an authority, and became a relative to walk alongside of us. We worked together because we all believed in the importance of sustaining our voices. The knowledge shared was done so with full awareness, pride, and sovereignty and joy.

As you consider the path forward, we ask that you please honor the decisions made by those who came before you. Each Tribal Council builds upon the work of the last. If we begin to erase or discredit the choices of our elders and past leaders, we risk weakening the very foundation of our sovereignty. Our language cannot survive if we tear down what each generation has built.

We urge you to center the truth and the teachings and decisions of our elders—not distortions or divisive agendas that seek to undo the good work of those who came before. Let us move forward in unity, with respect for those who loved us and are no longer with us physically, and with a responsibility to those yet to come.

Just as the land renews itself with each season, so too can our people find healing and renewal. We do not wish to fight among ourselves, but to walk together in a good way—grounded in truth, guided by our ancestors, and committed to the future of our language.

Wóphila thánka,

For this reason, we urge you to consider the facts and the truth, not distortions:

Key Facts About LLC's Work with Standing Rock:

Lakota Summer Institute (2007–2017):

- A 12-year partnership between SRST, Sitting Bull College, and LLC. With Elders and Learners attending from all over Lakota Country, and around the world.
- Budgets were reviewed and approved each year by SRST committees and council. These evaluations consistently showed praise from teachers, students, and officials.
- LLC secured additional funds for LSI through outside grant writing, directly benefiting Standing Rock.
- The Institute became nationally recognized and inspired similar programs across Indian country.
- No complaints or grievances were ever filed by SRST during its continued operation.

Interviews with Standing Rock Elders (2005-2019):

- Conducted at the request of SRST leaders such as Jesse Taken Alive, Sacheen Whitetail Cross, and Sunshine Carlow.
- Elders signed consent and release forms, proudly giving their words for future generations of speakers.
- Elders were financially compensated for their time, given a copy of their own recordings and to their families, and copies were shared with the SRST and with Sitting Bull College archives.
- Elders have always retained an inherent sovereign right to continue using their own language and telling their own stories.
- Standing Rock Elders generously shared their voices, and through their guidance and with LLC collaboration, these words now live on to support future generations of learners and speakers.

New Lakota Dictionary (1986-2008):

- Dictionary project began decades before any SRST contract and developed by LLC as its independent project.
- SRST leaders specifically requested inclusion of the Standing Rock dialect in 2004. The SRST logo was added at council's request to show their official support for the dictionary project.
- Elders such as Delores Taken Alive chose to write in the preface for the 1st edition dictionary.
- No objections were raised in 2008 or 2011 when the 1st and 2nd editions were published.
- The complaint against the dictionary, came nearly 17 years later, years long after Standing Rock's visible support for LLC.

Lakota Grammar Handbook (2016):

- Authored by respected Rosebud elder Ben Black Bear Jr. and Jan Ullrich, a respected linguist, whose collaboration significantly enhanced the description of Lakota lexicon and grammar.
- Independent of SRST contracts but supported during development.
- Grammar classes taught at the Summer Institute helped teachers learn and participate in codification.

Legal Framework:

- U.S. copyright law protects books and recordings, not entire languages.
- Contracts with SRST covered specific projects but did not assign LLC's independent works, nor its derivatives.
- Where contracts are silent, LLC retains rights under U.S. law (17 U.S.C. § 204).

- SRST jurisdiction cannot extend beyond the Standing Rock border to works in Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River, and other reservations across Lakota country.
- Attempts to “ban” LLC publications raise conflicts with federal law and free expression.

Honoring Elders and Protecting Their Legacy

Our elders gave their voices freely, with the understanding that their words would be preserved. They knew the dictionary and textbooks would be published by LLC, and they were proud to be contributors. To now say they were tricked or exploited is to dishonor their memory. It suggests they did not know what they were doing, when in fact they acted with intention and 7th generation foresight. We must not disrespect them by rewriting their actions as mistakes.

The Danger of Political Overreach

The current tribal complaint, and specifically the previously passed Resolution 150-22, attempts to claim ownership not just of LLC and Standing Rock’s projects, but of all Lakota and Dakota language works across the many different reservations. This is gross overreach by the council voting for the poorly written resolution. No tribe can claim ownership of a language spoken across many reservations. LLC’s board is multi-tribal, with members from Standing Rock, Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Sisseton, Wahpeton, and Cheyenne River and its current Executive Director and Chairperson are from Standing Rock itself. To call LLC “outsiders” is simply false.

Legal Reality

Federal copyright law is clear: ownership of works must be explicitly assigned. None of the contracts between SRST and LLC ever transferred ownership of the New Lakota Dictionary, the Lakota Grammar Handbook, or other independent projects. LLC retains those rights by law. Attempts to ban LLC from Standing Rock publications contradict federal law and will not hold up outside tribal jurisdiction.

Unity, Not Division

Our language is too fragile to survive continuous division. If every generation tears down what the previous one built, nothing will remain. Past councils welcomed LLC and thanked them for their work. The current outgoing administration and council had chosen to reject them.

Tomorrow’s council may yet reverse that decision. But in the meantime, valuable time, trust, and progress are being lost. The language cannot wait for us to resolve politics...it needs us all united.

We respectfully urge the Council and our leadership to direct our limited resources towards what the people truly need, rather than fighting against our own. As Dakota and Lakota leaders, let us not turn against our relatives. This is true especially for our woman amidst the ongoing MMIW crisis, as the women have always carried and protected our cultural ways and language. The way forward is through trust, connection, and unity, not division.

Our elder fluent board members, both past and current, never wanted to fight our own people, and they do not want this for us. Their lives have been dedicated to preservation, teaching, and healing, never to conflict. If full unity is not possible due to politics, then at the very least respect those fluent elders who wish to work towards solutions with collaboration, instead of continuous roadblocks and distractions.

Allow those who are committed to let this work continue for the generations before us who carried the language through hardship, and for the generations yet to come who deserve to inherit it whole and intact.

We may not be perfect, but we remain committed to holding self-accountability and self-responsibility to our past, our future, and to the spirit of the language itself. The language is not a political tool. It is a living relative, and it needs all of us working together, or at the very least, not working against each other.

The truth is simple: our elders were not victims. They were proud contributors. Past councils were not tricked. They made deliberate choices to invite LLC, to approve budgets, and to support these projects.

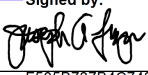
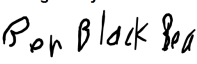
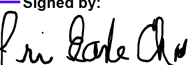
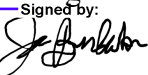
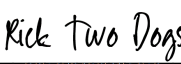
To deny that history is to deny their wisdom, and to weaken the trust our people place in today's leadership.

Our language cannot survive division. It cannot survive if we dishonor our elders by questioning their decisions and tremendous contributions. It can only survive if we honor every contribution made in good faith and continue building on what was left to us.

We urge you to reconsider the spirit of Resolution 150-22 and the current tribal complaint filed. Not for the sake of LLC alone, but for the sake of Standing Rock's honor, for the legacy of our elders, and for the survival of the Lakota and Dakota languages we hold sacred.

With Much Respect,

LLC Board of Directors:

Signed by: 	10/4/2025
F505B737B4C743B... Dr. Ambrose "Joe" Luger, MD - <i>Standing Rock Sioux Tribe</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/3/2025
CCA7138793E8432... Ben Black Bear Jr. - <i>Rosebud Sioux Tribe</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/3/2025
2519ACF059A6406... Bernadine LaClaire-Little Thunder - <i>Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/2/2025
BD192F271CB741E... Iris Eagle Chasing - <i>Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/4/2025
819B48D80DCB401... Joe Bendickson - <i>Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/2/2025
COB45912BF1D4B0... Richard Two Dogs - <i>Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Tribe</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/2/2025
CF80DE2430EB400... Sacheen Whitetail Cross - <i>Executive Director (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe)</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/3/2025
Q2BD96BF5A07447... Tipiziwin Tolman - <i>BOD Chairwoman (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe)</i>	Date
Signed by: 	10/2/2025
3D18D683BE52498... Travis Condon - <i>Standing Rock Sioux Tribe</i>	Date