



The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians

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August 26, 2024

The Honorable Gary Peters,
724 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Secretary of the Interior
Madam Secretary Debra Haaland,
1849 C. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Park Superintendent
Scott Tucker
9922 Front Street
Empire, MI 49630

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Subject: GTB Opposition to the Extension of Trail (Segment 9) in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Park Based on Environmental Concerns and Treaty Rights

Dear Senator Peters, Senator Stabenow, Madam Secretary, and Superintendent Tucker,

I am writing on behalf of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (GTB) to formally express our opposition to the proposed extension of the trail in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. The Pathway to Good Harbor, or Segment 9, of the Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail, will extend north from Bohemian Road (CR 669) to Good Harbor Trail (CR 651). Our opposition is grounded in serious concerns regarding the potential impacts on wetlands, tree removal, and the treaty gathering rights of our Tribal members.

The proposed extension threatens to disrupt delicate wetland ecosystems, which are vital to the environmental health of the region. Wetlands serve as critical habitats for a wide variety of species, including those that are culturally significant to the GTB. The proposed tree removal further exacerbates these environmental concerns, potentially leading to habitat destruction and a loss of biodiversity. Substantial tree removal will also limit the carbon capture ability of the present tree diversity thereby contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, an increasing environmental threat of global warming that may not have been completely considered in the initial stages of the review process.

Moreover, the proposed extension encroaches upon areas protected under treaty rights that guarantee our Tribal members the ability to gather resources for subsistence and cultural practices. These rights are foundational to our way of life and are legally protected. Any infringement upon these rights is not only a violation of our treaties but also a direct threat to the cultural heritage and sustenance of our community.

Considering these significant concerns, we respectfully request the following actions:

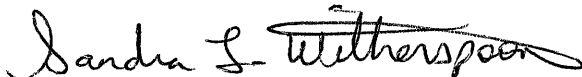
1. Revocation, amendment, or reconsideration of any current or proposed federal appropriations for the trail Segment 9 extension. GTB opposes the identified funding in S. 4796, Senate Report 118th Congress 2nd Session, Report 118-199 p. 169 that provides the following: “Department of Transportation Highway Infrastructure Program...Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail: Pathway to Good Harbor... \$3,000,000.00.”
2. An extension of the public comment period within the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, allowing GTB ample opportunity to formally register its opposition and provide detailed input on the project's potential impacts.

It is our hope that the relevant decision-makers will carefully consider the environmental and cultural ramifications of this proposed extension. We urge you to uphold the principles of environmental stewardship and respect for Indigenous treaty rights in your deliberations.

GTB recognizes that the development of Segment 9 has been the subject of a multi-year environmental review process in which there has been public comment in advance of issuing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. GTB, as a tribal government, has not previously submitted public comments either in support or opposition to Segment 9, however, we are compelled to do so now based on the significant concerns that have been brought to our attention by our tribal members. We have an obligation to share and advocate for the concerns and interests of our tribal members, and so ask that you now take these concerns into consideration before deciding whether to proceed with construction of Segment 9.

Thank you for your attention to this crucial matter. We look forward to engaging in further discussions to ensure that the rights and environmental concerns of the GTB are fully acknowledged and addressed.

Sincerely,



Sandra L. Witherspoon
Tribal Chairwoman

Cc: GTB Tribal Council
GTB Natural Resources Committee.