



Narragansett Indian Tribe

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Chief Sachem's Office

April 2, 2025

The Honorable Evan P. Shanley
Chairman House State
Government and Elections Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: NARRAGANSETT INDIAN TRIBE
OPPOSITION TO 2025-H-5733

Dear Chairman Shanley:

I am writing on behalf of the Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island in opposition to H-5733, A Joint Resolution Conferring Limited Purpose Recognition to the Native American Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe (Resolution). The Resolution is scheduled for consideration on Wednesday, April 3, 2025, in the House State Government and Elections Committee.

In 1983, the Narragansett Tribe was federally acknowledged and recognized by the United States as a sovereign Indian Nation. (See, 48 Fed. Reg. 6177-78, Feb. 10, 1983). The Narragansett Tribe is the only federally recognized and acknowledged Indian tribe in the State of Rhode Island. The findings and conclusions of its federal acknowledgment were that the Narragansett Indian Tribe "in aboriginal times, inhabited the area which is today the state of Rhode Island." (Emph. Added).

Over the past few years, various groups identifying themselves as Indian, Indian tribes, Indian groups and Indian nations have made claims for recognition, benefits, cultural resources, and properties from, or within, the State of Rhode Island. Resolution H-5733 would provide state recognition solely to the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe. No other Native American Tribe is under consideration.

In the past several years similar bills have been submitted which proposed a comprehensive petition process for State Recognition of Native American Tribes in general. As proposed, Resolution H-5733 excludes this critical review process for recognition, but instead provides automatic recognition by the State of Rhode Island to the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe without any substantive historical, anthropological, and genealogical review.

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The procedures for Federal recognition of an Indian tribe are set forth under 25 C.F.R. Part 83. A petitioner for federal recognition as an Indian Tribe must satisfy seven mandatory criteria including: that the petitioner has identified as an American Indian entity on a substantially continuous basis since 1900; that the petitioner comprises a distinct community and demonstrates that it existed as a community from 1900 until the present; that the petitioner demonstrate that it has maintained political influence or authority over its members as an autonomous entity from historical times until the present; that the petitioner provide a copy of the group's present governing document including its membership criteria; that the petitioner demonstrate that its membership consists of individuals who descend from the historical Indian tribe or from historical Indian tribes that combined and functioned as a single autonomous political entity and provide a current membership list; and, that the petitioner show that the membership of the petitioning group is composed principally of persons who are not members of any acknowledged North American Indian tribe. *See, 25 C.F.R. 83.11(a) & (b).* The Petition is then reviewed by qualified expert historians, anthropologists and genealogists.

The Narragansett's Petition for Federal Recognition required volumes of documentation including evidence of historical existence as a tribe, evidence of independent tribal government with political influence or authority over its members, Tribal governing documents such as by-laws and constitution and genealogy documenting each individual member. *See, bia.gov – Petitioner # 59: Narragansett Indian Tribe, RI.*

The Narragansett Tribe opposes H-5733, which by legislative fiat would grant State recognition of the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe. In addition to the overriding concerns regarding lack of process as set forth above, the Resolution fails to set forth any criteria by which the Seaconke Wampanoag must demonstrate they comprise a tribal group or government within the State of Rhode Island.¹ Furthermore, passage of H-5733 will establish a poor precedent encouraging multiple petitions by other Indian groups.

Several states have enacted a state recognition process similar to the Federal recognition process. Notably the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Commission on Indian Affairs (MCIA) was created by the legislature in 1974. *See, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/indian-affairs>.* As early as February 7, 2022, the MCAI began discussions regarding State Recognition.² *See, Minutes of the Virtual Meeting of the Commission on Indian Affairs, 2/7/22.* More recently on October 7, 2024, the MCIA formally began the process of proposing legislation for Tribal Recognition. *See, Commission Meeting Notice and Agenda, 10/7/24.* The minutes of that meeting states: "The first and only topic on the agenda was state recognition and the role of the Commission of Indian Affairs." The Commission also stated that only three tribes, by Executive Order 126, are recognized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts they are the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council; the Wampanoag Tribal Council of Gay Head Indian; and, the Hassanamisco Nipmuc Tribal Council. Other tribes have a relationship with the Commonwealth. "We need to establish

¹ The Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe is a Massachusetts Non-Profit Corporation with a principal place of business at 412 Taunton Ave, Seekonk, MA. All the Directors list their address in Massachusetts.

² The MCIA was asked about the recognition of the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe. The MCIA stated that the Proclamation previously given to the Seaconke Wampanoag Tribe was not binding (legislation) recognition. That what is needed is to develop a criteria for state recognition to include history and genealogy.

a criteria and recommend a process to the legislature to address this.” See, *Minutes of the Virtual Meeting of the Commission on Indian Affairs, 10/7/24*.

The Narragansett Tribe further opposes H-5733 based on the historical actions of the State of Rhode Island. The most notable example was the “1880 Detribalization Act.” In 1880 the State of Rhode Island adopted legislation which sought to abolish tribal authority and relations, declared tribal members citizens, ended any state relationship with the tribe and forced the sale of tribal lands. See, *Recommendation and Summary of Evidence for Proposed Finding for Federal Acknowledgment of the Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island Pursuant to 25 CFR 83 (June 29, 1982)*. The “1880 Detribalization Act” mentions no other Indian tribe, nation or people having any lands, relationship, or governmental standing in the State of Rhode Island. The State at no point has any such documented history with the Seaconke Wampanoag, or other tribal groups, who might now seek historical recognition.

In conclusion, no tribal group, or community, should be recognized by the State of Rhode Island absent a review by qualified experts of a petition for recognition containing sufficient historical, anthropological, and genealogical evidence warranting recognition.

Sincerely,



Chief Sachem Anthony Dean Stanton

cc: Governor Daniel McKee
Speaker of the House K. Joseph Shekarchi
President of the Senate Dominick J. Ruggerio
Honorable Members of the House Committee on State Government & Elections
Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse
Honorable Jack Reed
Honorable Seth Magaziner
Honorable Gabe Amo