

This letter was submitted to Washington Post but not accepted. It has been sent to Standing Rock Tribal Legal Defense Team at their request.

Letter opposing DAPL and the impact on psychological well-being.

The Society of Indian Psychologists reaffirms its opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline. The scholars, researchers, teachers and clinicians of the Society of Indian Psychologists (SIP) note with significant concern that the Trump administration has chosen to ignore the actions of the court, Corps of Engineers, the citizens and government of Standing Rock, and the Water Protectors by proceeding with the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) and resurrecting the Keystone Pipeline proposal that was rejected as undesirable several years ago. We oppose both pipelines on the grounds that they will encroach on the water and land of several Native American reservations that were granted to Native American people by treaty, and will desecrate sites that are clearly sacred to Native people. The Keystone Pipeline, for example, may encroach on the sacred site of Wounded Knee.

In addition to our concerns, over 200 scientists have shared their expert opinions that the danger of the DAPL not only affects the reservation lands but the delicate ecosystems relied upon by millions of people who live downstream on the Missouri River and who depend on the river for their drinking water and their livelihood. In addition, science was used to make a previous determination that the Keystone Pipeline would be harmful as well. It is important to understand that DAPL and Keystone affect more than Native Americans communities but also millions of communities on or near the rivers and pipelines.

In the U.S. Native people have already suffered tremendous losses due to forced relocation, assimilation, and many acts of discrimination. Those historical events have contributed to many mental health issues among Native people today. Forcing pipelines on people who do not desire them on their reservations and treaty lands re-traumatizes a population that has endured and survived significant mistreatment in this society and will increase psychological distress. In the context of the Native American worldview, drilling through land and under water that is sacred to the people is considered a desecration of the highest order, and continues a pattern of calculated assault on Native American spiritual beliefs that has contributed to great psychological harm to Native American people including those at Standing Rock.

The Standing Rock people have been subject to unspeakable oppression and traumatic loss related to assimilation practices such as forced relocation of children from their families to boarding schools for years at a time, and the violation of treaty rights over and over again, including with the current pipeline project. Indeed health care providers at the Standing Rock encampments have reported that violations of land, water, and tribal sovereignty granted by treaty, coercive practices by authorities to dissuade Water Protectors, and violent aggression by authorities attempting to strong arm Water Protectors with tear gas and rubber bullets have triggered debilitating instances of “re-experiencing” of trauma that commonly occurs when people who have been traumatized are then re-traumatized. These violations have also been linked to episodes of post-traumatic stress reactions and acute anxiety. In addition, the research clearly indicates that psychological trauma has been linked to increased substance abuse among Native American communities, and furthermore, trauma and substance abuse have been strongly associated with suicidal behavior, very distressing when considering that Native American

people, and youth and young adults in particular, tend to be at significant risk for suicide. As a professional psychological association representing Native Americans, we strongly oppose further psychological harm as a consequence of the DAPL project and the renewed violation of the Standing Rock people they represent.

We call upon the current administration to respect Native American treaty rights and civil rights, respect the water and land and its sacredness, and protect the health of Native people and downstream communities by withdrawing support for this potentially dangerous and desecrating pipeline. We call on you to reconsider the proposal given the seriousness of the threats to the health and mental health of American Indian populations, the high probability of a costly cleanup should a pipeline fail (as we have recently seen in Iowa, North Dakota, and Saskatchewan), and with respect to treating all citizens justly.

Art Blume, Ph.D., President, Society of Indian Psychologists

Gayle Skawennio Morse, Ph.D., President-elect, Society of Indian Psychologists