

Dead or Alive - Grand Ronde Tribe Terminates Citizenship

July 24, 2014

GRAND RONDE, OR – The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon Enrollment Committee yesterday stripped 86 Grand Ronde Indians of their tribal membership by a vote of 5 to 1. The move not only terminates the members' tribal citizenship, it removes deceased Grand Ronde members from the Tribe's membership rolls. It will affect the employment of many of those disenrolled, strip them of economic and education assistance, and end the housing and health care benefits of several Tribal elders, among others.

The latest disenrollment effort at Grand Ronde comes after a sharply divided Tribal Council accelerated the disenrollment process earlier this month. Sweeping "Emergency Amendments," passed narrowly on July 2 without the normal public comment and waiting periods, streamline the disenrollment process at Grand Ronde and were crafted to ensure the disenrollment of the 86 Grand Ronde Indians, notwithstanding mounting political opposition to disenrollment on the western Oregon reservation.

The amendments to the law removed the Tribal Council entirely from the disenrollment process and conferred decision-making authority to the Enrollment Committee, a handpicked administrative body that had already twice recommended that the Tribal Council disenroll these 86 Grand Ronde Indians.

Tribal Council, the final authority on enrollment decisions since the Tribe's restoration in 1983, was previously scheduled to make a decision on the enrollment status of the targeted family on July 9.

But when the disenrollment efforts were threatened in April by a majority of the Tribal Council members who agreed that the 86 Grand Ronde members had proved they met the lineal descent requirements, pro-disenrollment Tribal Council Chairman Reynold Leno procedurally blocked an up-or-down vote on the matter, allowing time to pass the "Emergency Amendments" to the Enrollment Ordinance.

"For almost a year, the Tribal Council has admonished us to follow the 'process' and now they changed the process with less than a week remaining before a decision was to be made," stated family spokesperson Mia Prickett. The Enrollment Committee refused to grant additional hearings—as prescribed under the new process. Otherwise, details of the new "process" and how the Enrollment Committee made its decision in its new role as final arbiter remained unclear. On July 23, the members were notified through their attorneys that the Enrollment Committee had voted to disenroll all 86 Grand Ronde members.

The Committee's timing was calculated to deprive the 86 members of their right to vote. July 23, the date members were notified of their termination, was the date that

the Grand Ronde government was legally required to mail absentee ballots for the upcoming elections. Disenrolling the Grand Ronde members in advance of the election allows the pro-disenrollment Tribal Leaders to disenfranchise these 86 Grand Ronde members at the ballot box.

"The pro-termination faction of Tribal Council is consolidating power," said Prickett. "The latest move is clearly aimed at suppressing political dissent and preventing us from voting in our Tribal election."

According to an article written by David Wilkins, McKnight Presidential Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota and member of the Lumbee Nation, the real motivation behind disenrollments may be purely political and stem from "tribal political figures who appear intent on expanding their own economic and political empires," (*Indian Country Today*).

Currently, three incumbent Tribal Council members are up for re-election in September's Tribal Council race, including Council Chairman Reynold Leno.

"The actions of these rogue leaders call into question tribal sovereignty. Tribal officials driven by greed and self interests are going to destroy what Indian Country has worked so hard to achieve. When citizenship and Tribal identity are under attack, nobody is safe," stated family member and tribal elder Valerie Alexander. "This is a tragedy for a tribe that was once known for its integrity and generosity."

The 86 family members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde descend directly from Chief Tumulth, the first Chief of the Watlala band of Chinook Indians, signatory to seminal Treaty of the Tribe. In addition to the Treaty, 66 descendants of Chief Tumulth also descend from one of his four wives, Susan Tomolcha, whose name validly appears on the 1872 Grand Ronde Indian Census Roll.

Throughout this 10-month struggle, the family has repeatedly presented numerous certified state documents to the Enrollment Department, Enrollment Committee and Tribal Council demonstrating their right to tribal membership. In addition, they have been supported by expert testimony, tribal elders and past tribal council members.

According to testimony provided by Eirik Thorsgard, Cultural Protection Manager for the Tribe, the 1855 Treaty is in fact a qualifying record of Grand Ronde members because "...the Executive Order that created the Grand Ronde reservation in 1857 specifically states and references back to the Willamette Valley Treaty and not to any other treaty." He continued to state that, "[the Treaty] is a record because of the Executive Order."

Despite Thorsgard's expert testimony, and certified documents proving the family's ancestry, the Enrollment Committee went against their own expert and voted to disenroll the family.

In signing the Treaty, Chief Tumulth ceded his lands to the United States Government in exchange for a safe, permanent home for his people. "We are his descendants, and we have a legal right to that safe home. Grand Ronde claims his lands as part of the Tribe's ceded lands, but now they terminate us," says family

member Russell Wilkinson. "It isn't right to claim the lands but not claim the people who come from those lands".

Disenrollment is shocking for this family considering the Grand Ronde government used several members of the family descending from Chief Tumulth to fight other Tribes' development of casinos in the Columbia River Gorge.

"The Tribe used our family to testify at public hearings and Grand Ronde used their claim to our ceded lands to successfully fight against casino projects in Cascade Locks, Troutdale, and La Center, WA. Apparently they don't need us anymore," continued Wilkinson.

"This is morally and ethically reprehensible." said Prickett. She and her family are just some of the most recent members of the national Native community embroiled in the disenrollment epidemic sweeping through Indian country. "Disenrollment is expanding throughout Native America, with Native nations in at least 17 states engaging in the practice," writes Wilkins (*Indian Country Today*).

The family may now appeal the Enrollment Committee's decision for involuntary loss of membership in Tribal court. However, there are no court-appointed lawyers in Tribal Court. The family will have to bear the financial burden of legal representation. "It would be irresponsible of us to go into the court system without legal representation," said Prickett.

"This emergency amendment has long ranging implications and will have unknown effects for our entire Tribe. It is not just about our family's case, every tribal member lost their right to appear in front of their Tribal Council for a final hearing. The checks and balances are gone" stated family member, Lise Alexander. "And really, where was the 'emergency'?"

There is no current timeline for the family's case to be heard in Tribal Court.