SpencerFane®

Stephen R. Ward

Of Counsel

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Overview

Stephen Ward helps tribal governments, tribal enterprises, businesses, and financial institutions navigate complex American Indian law matters so they can protect their interests, advance strategic objectives, and pursue long-term economic growth.

For more than three decades, Steve has represented tribes and tribal interests across the country in litigation, appeals, regulatory proceedings, and other high-stakes matters involving sovereignty, jurisdiction, environmental and energy issues, breach of trust claims, cultural property matters, taxation, and tribal-state relations. Clients rely on his deep understanding of federal Indian law and tribal governance to address complex legal challenges and develop practical solutions. Steve has handled appeals before the U.S. Supreme Court and multiple U.S. Courts of Appeals and regularly appears before federal administrative bodies with jurisdiction over tribal matters.

A significant portion of Steve's practice focuses on economic development and commercial transactions in Indian Country. He advises tribes, tribal enterprises, corporations, and financial institutions on business ventures, financings, gaming and resort developments, and other strategic initiatives. By combining legal insight with a practical understanding of tribal business operations, Steve helps clients structure opportunities that support sustainable growth and long-term success.

Education

- University of Tulsa College of Law, 1990 (J.D.)
- Oklahoma State University, 1978 (B.S.)

Bar Admissions

- Oklahoma, 1990

Court Admissions

- U.S. Supreme Court, 1996
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, 1999
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, 1996
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, 1995
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, 1991
- U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit, 1997
- U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Oklahoma, 1995
- U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma, 1993
- U.S. District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma, 1990
- Court of Indian Offenses, 1994
- Court of Indian Appeals, 1994

Distinctions

- *Best Lawyers in America*, Banking and Finance Law, Energy Law, Gaming Law, Native American Law, 2010-2027
    - Lawyer of the Year, Native American Law, 2018
- *Chambers USA*, Nationwide, Native American Law, Band 3, 2023-2026
- *Chambers USA*, Oklahoma, Native American Law, Band 1, 2016-2026
- Eagle Scout Award, 1972
- *Journal Record*, Leadership in Law Award, 2009

Memberships

- Tulsa County Bar Association
- Oklahoma Bar Association
- Muscogee (Creek) Nation Bar Association
- Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma (O-Gah-Pah) Bar Association
- Federal Bar Association
- Rocky Mountain Mineral Law Foundation, Trustee-at-Large, 2007-2010
- Gower Federal Service, Contributing Editor, 2000-present

Presentations and Publications

- "Maynard v. Cartwright: How the Supreme Court Killed the Catchall Category in the Oklahoma Death Penalty," *24 Tulsa Law Journal 215*, 1988

Related Experience

- Represented an Indian tribe in obtaining an opinion from the National Indian Gaming Commission in November 2014 authorizing gaming on newly acquired lands pursuant to the "last recognized reservation" exception under 25 U.S.C. § 2719(a)(2)(B).
- Represented an Indian tribe and the surviving sons of the first Native American to win a gold medal for the U.S. in the Olympics in obtaining a determination in a federal court requiring a repatriation proceeding concerning his remains pursuant to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a ruling subsequently reversed by the Third

Circuit. On appeal.

- Represented an Indian tribe and individual members of the tribe in breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims brought pursuant to a special congressional reference adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives in December 2013.
- Represented an Indian tribe in obtaining a partition in January 2013 of undivided fee and restricted Indian land, one of the few such actions approved in modern times.
- Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with a $41.5 million senior secured credit facility in June 2012.
- Represented an Indian tribe in major breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims initiated in January 2012.
- Represented more than 1,000 members of an Indian tribe in breach-of-trust litigation before the U.S. Court of Federal Claims filed in January 2012.
- Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with the issuance of $295 million in senior secured notes in July 2011.
- Represented a tribal enterprise in obtaining a federal court decision holding that, as is also the case with respect to states, federal patent laws do not provide for waivers of immunity for claims against Indian tribes.
- Represented Indian allottees in obtaining a federal court ruling in December 2010 permitting them to take direct action against a third party when the Secretary of the Interior refused to take action to collect proceeds from the sale of their resources.
- Represented an Indian tribe in litigation establishing an Indian tribe's right to pursue claims as a sovereign (parens patriae) for natural resource damages for the lands within its Indian Country jurisdiction.
- Represented a tribal enterprise in obtaining a $25 million equipment financing facility in November 2007.
- Represented a tribal enterprise in connection with the issuance of $197 million in senior notes and $52 million in senior subordinated notes in October 2007.
- Represented a federal royalty payor in litigation successfully establishing in ruling of first impression that federal statutes of limitation are applicable to collection of federal oil and gas royalties.
- Represented Indian tribes and tribal enterprises in numerous actions relating to enforcing the exclusive jurisdiction of tribal courts over tort claims arising at Indian gaming enterprises in Oklahoma.
- Represented tribes and tribal enterprises in numerous actions relating to the scope of tribal sovereign immunity and the scope of waivers given pursuant to such immunity.