Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Forrest J. Gerard, the recently confirmed Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, today challenged national Indian leaders to join in the preparing a national policy statement on Indian affairs.

Gerard made the challenge in an address at the 34th annual convention of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) in Dallas, Texas.

Gerard acknowledged that ''there has been concern on the part of the Indian people that this Administration has yet to announce a comprehensive Indian policy statement." He said that the Administration wanted the Assistant Secretary to take -the lead in policy initiative for Indian affairs. Gerard then asked NCAI and the other major Indian organization, the National Tribal Chairmen's Association (NTCA), to "come up with a joint policy statement. . . so that we will have your input in formulating policy.

Commenting on reactions to Indian land claims, treaty fishing rights and other issues, Gerard said that court victories "are in danger of being lost because of political pressure." Gerard urged the Indians to tell their story in a reasonable and rational manner -- not sacrificing their rights -but communicating effectively.

Gerard said that pressures are being manifested in county and state governments as well as in Congress. "The pressures on some issues are so intense that even our friends find it at times difficult to support Indian causes," he said. "Tribal governments are growing in scope and sophistication, and in this process are asserting more of their legal rights. This is difficult for many non-Indians to accept."

Gerard repeated confirmation hearings commitments to strengthen the Bureau's capacity to fulfill its role as trustee; to continue to aid tribal governments as they assume more responsibilities in the era of self-determination and to improve service delivery through Federal programs or through self-determination mechanisms at the tribal level.