Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – The Department of the Interior announced today it is taking the final steps in its efforts to identify the whereabouts of approximately 17,000 Native Americans to provide compensation as part of the Cobell settlement. The settlement of the Cobell lawsuit has reached an important deadline and the Department needs Class Members, or the heirs of Class Members, to provide documentation of their status to the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST) and/or the Garden City Group (GCG), the Cobell claims administrator, by November 27, 2017, which is a court-imposed deadline for claiming settlement compensation so that payment may be made.

In 1996, Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe, and four other Native American representatives filed a class-action lawsuit against two departments of the United States government: the Department of the Interior and the Department of the Treasury. The plaintiffs claimed that the government had incorrectly accounted for income derived from Indian trust assets, which are legally owned by the U.S. government but held in trust for individual Native Americans (the beneficial owners).

In 2009, the parties to the suit negotiated a settlement in the case, and in 2010 Congress passed implementing legislation designating $3.4 billion for the settlement: $1.4 billion was allocated to be paid to the plaintiffs and $1.9 billion was allocated for a Land Buy-Back Program and a newly created educational scholarship fund for American Indian and Alaska Native students.

The settlement payment process is being handled by the GCG with the cooperation of the Interior Department. Class members all over the country have received detailed information about their legal rights and options via the United States Postal Service. Information was also provided through an extensive media campaign which included Native America print media, social media, television and radio ads, and online advertising.

The bulk of the settlement monies have already been paid to individual Indians. Despite extensive efforts to contact all potential claimants, there still remain several thousand Individual Indian Money (IIM) account holders who are classified as “whereabouts unknown" (WAU). These WAU accounts total millions of dollars in potential settlement payments. The Department has been making extensive efforts to reach these WAU account holders so that they or their heirs can submit their documentation before the November 27 deadline expires.

Class Members or the heirs of Class Members should provide documentation immediately to the GCG by calling 1-800-961-6109, by emailing to Info@IndianTrust.com, or by U.S. mail to Indian Trust Settlement, P.O. Box 9577, Dublin, OH 43017-4877. Class members can also search OST’s Whereabouts Unknown database. If you have any questions about the OST Whereabouts Unknown Cobell list, please call the Indian Trust Beneficiary Call Center at 1-888-678-6836.

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