Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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TO: Indian Country Reporters
FROM: U.S. Dept. of the Interior Communications Office
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RE: U.S. Department of the Interior Tribal Nations Accomplishments

Today, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell will begin a nationwide tour to highlight the progress the nation has made over the last eight years on public lands, waters and wildlife management and restoring nation-to-nation relationships with Native Americans.

As part of President Obama's commitment to strengthening Indian Country, Secretary Jewell will visit the Acoma Pueblo, west of Albuquerque, today, to highlight Administration efforts to strengthen tribal nations. She will be joined by the newly-appointed Bureau of Indian Affairs Director Bruce Loudermilk and Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) Director Tony Dearman.

From the beginning, President Obama has made it a top priority to help bring real and lasting change to Indian Country and to open a new chapter with First Americans. In close consultation with Native Americans and Alaska Natives, the Obama Administration is delivering on its promise to restore the integrity of the nation-to-nation relationship with Indian Country.

The Interior Department has played a leading role in empowering tribal nations, with self-governance and self-determination serving as the foundation for every effort. Over the past (nearly) eight years, the Interior Department has accelerated the restoration of tribal homelands, improved public safety in tribal communities, resolved century-old water disputes, made critical investments in education, and reached many more milestones that are helping tribal nations pursue a future of their choosing.

Secretary Jewell, as the first Chair of the White House Council on Native American Affairs, has helped ensure that the federal family has regular and meaningful engagement on the key issues that impact Indian Country. In her nearly four years in office, Jewell has visited more than 40 tribes across the country.

For background and reporting purposes, here's a snapshot of the Interior Department's work in Indian Country:

Advancing Self-Determination and Self-Governance

- Developed a tribal consultation policy for the Department of the Interior, emphasizing trust, respect and a shared responsibility in providing tribal governments an expanded role in informing federal policy that impacts Indian Country
- Engaged in meaningful consultation with tribal leaders through the first-ever White House Tribal Nations Conferences
    - The Interior Department helped host the annual conference, an opportunity for leaders from the 567 federally recognized tribes to interact directly with the President and high-level

federal government officials

- Chaired the White House Council on Native American Affairs, established in 2013 by President Obama
    - Under Secretary Jewell's leadership, and in consideration of tribal feedback, the Council created five interagency subgroups in the areas of: economic development and infrastructure; education; energy; environment and climate change; and health
    - The Council facilitates engagement with tribes, recently inviting the President of the National Congress of American Indians to address the Council to begin more direct engagement with tribal leaders
- Forged an agenda of reconciliation and empowerment for Indian Country, seeking to end decades of litigation and long-standing disputes through fair trust settlements
    - The Administration has settled a record number of lawsuits or claims related to mismanagement of monetary assets and natural resources held in trust, some of the claims dating back more than 50 years
    - In *Ramah Navajo Chapter v. Jewell*, for example, the Department of Justice and Interior reached a $940 million proposed settlement agreement with tribes and tribal organizations to resolve a 25-year-old legal dispute related to contract support costs.
- Reached an historic $3.4 billion settlement in *Cobell v. Salazar* - the largest class action lawsuit in American history - to settle decades of tribal trust mismanagement throughout Indian Country
    - Established the National Commission on Indian Trust Administration and Reform to undertake a forward-looking, comprehensive evaluation of Interior's trust management of nearly $4 billion in Native American trust funds
    - Created the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations to consolidate fractional land interests across Indian Country and unlock economic development
        - Since it began making offers in December 2013, the Program has paid more than $900 million to individual landowners and restored the equivalent of more than 1.7 million acres of land to tribal governments
        - As a result, tribes have been able to advance important projects:
            - Community water supply plant (Crow Tribe)
            - Housing and economic development (Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Pine Ridge Reservation)
            - Cultural renewal and burial ground expansion (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation)
    - Formed the Indian Education Scholarship Fund which has provided $4.5 million for higher learning opportunities for Native youth
    - Reenergized a commitment to meeting the critical water needs of Native American communities
        - Finalized six landmark water rights settlements that will help deliver clean running water and fair water allocations to Native American communities - many for the first time. The permanent water supply will vastly improve quality of life and offer greater economic security
        - Two additional water rights settlements and another amendment to implement a previously enacted settlement is currently pending in Congress; all of which the Administration supports
- Announced a policy to identify and encourage opportunities for cooperative management of public lands and waters that have a nexus to historic tribal lands and instituting the first actual agreement with the AHTNA Intertribal Resource Commission to create a cooperative wildlife management demonstration project.

- For the first time ever, formalized a path forward by which the Native Hawaiian community could seek a government-to-government relationship with the United States
- Reformed broken federal recognition process to establish a more transparent, timely and consistent process by which the Interior Department may formally recognize Indian tribes

Restoring Tribal Homelands

- Broke the logjam on trust land applications to restore tribal homelands and strengthen tribal economies
    - Since 2009, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has processed thousands of trust applications and restored more than 542,000 acres of land into trust, exceeding the goal of reaching 500,000 acres by the end of the current administration
- Finalized a rule to allow the Interior Department to accept land into trust for federally recognized Alaska tribes, thereby advancing tribal sovereignty and closing a long-standing gap that had not extended this eligibility to Alaska Natives
- Provided tribes greater control over their homelands by overhauling antiquated leasing regulations
    - Streamlined surface leasing regulations for Indian lands that had bottlenecked applications to build homes, businesses and wind and solar projects
    - Provided tribes the authority to approve and manage leases on their trust lands without BIA approval, through the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership Act of 2012 (HEARTH Act) and its voluntary, alternative land leasing process
    - Expanded leasing provisions to give Indian landowners greater control to obtain BIA grants of rights-of-way on Indian land, including for roads, power lines, or water lines

Empowering Native Youth

- Worked collaboratively, as part of the Obama Administration's Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) initiative, to remove barriers between Native youth and opportunities to succeed
    - Spearheaded the Tiwahe Initiative, designed to promote the stability and security of Native American families by addressing interrelated issues associated with child welfare, poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse and incarceration
- Finalized rule to implement the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to protect the rights of Indian children, their parents and their tribes in state child welfare proceedings
- Made steady progress toward improving the delivery of education to Indian children
    - Obtained funding to rebuild and improve Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools in the most dilapidated conditions; identified new priority schools that are eligible for funding for campus-wide replacement
    - Instituted a transformation of the BIE, with the goal of supporting tribal control of student education and turning BIE from a direct operator of schools into a support system for student achievement and administrative success.
