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Media Contact: Jessica Kershaw (DOI), 202-208-6416 Nedra Darling (AS-IA), (202) 219-4152
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WASHINGTON – As part of President Obama's commitment to honoring a nation-to-nation relationship with Indian Country, four cabinet-level departments today joined the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in releasing an action plan to strengthen the protection of Indian sacred sites and provide greater tribal access to these heritage areas. The interagency plan is required by the Memorandum of Understanding signed in December 2012 by the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Interior and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation regarding coordination and collaboration for the protection of sacred sites.

"The federal family has a special, shared responsibility to respect and foster American Indian and Alaska Native cultural and religious heritage, and this action plan will guide us in that important role," Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said. "We have dedicated considerable staff and resources to address this important issue and will continue to work with the tribes and their spiritual and religious leaders to carry-out the action plan."

"The Obama administration has taken a number of steps to ensure that American Indians and Alaska Natives have full access to the programs and services offered across the federal government," said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. "Since 2009, USDA has stepped up Tribal consultation efforts. We understand the importance of these sites and will continue to make sure Tribes have full access to the resources they need in their communities."

"Protecting America's air and water and our nation's heritage is an important part of the Energy Department's commitment to Tribal Nations across the country, particularly those that are neighbors to the Department's National Laboratories, sites and facilities," said Energy Secretary Steven Chu. "I look forward to continuing this important work and collaborating with other federal agencies and Tribal Nations to protect Indian sacred sites throughout the United States."

"Through collaboration and consultation, the signatory agencies are working together to raise awareness about Indian sacred sites and the importance of maintaining their integrity," said Milford Wayne Donaldson, chairman of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. "The tools to be developed under this action plan will help agencies meet their Section 106 responsibilities while affording greater protections for sacred sites. The Advisory Council is very pleased to be part of this historic initiative to address the protection and preservation of Indian sacred sites." The MOU, unveiled at the White House Tribal Nations Conference in 2012, will be in effect for five years.

The MOU commits the signatory agencies to work together to achieve enhanced and improved interdepartmental coordination and collaboration to improve the protection of and tribal access to Indian sacred sites. Among other things, the MOU commits the participating agencies to work together on developing guidance on the management and treatment of sacred sites, on identifying and recommending ways to overcome impediments to the protection of such sites while preserving the sites' confidentiality, on creating a training program for federal staff and on developing outreach plans to both the public and to non-Federal partners.

The Action Plan includes:

- A Mission Statement that commits the agencies to work together to improve the protection of and tribal access to Indian sacred sites, in accordance with Executive Order 13007 and the MOU, through enhanced and improved interdepartmental coordination, collaboration and consultation with tribes;
- A list of actions the agencies will undertake together;
- A commitment to consultation with Indian tribes in developing and implementing the actions outlined in the plan to ensure meaningful strategies for protecting sacred sites;
- The establishment of a standing working committee made up of designated senior staff from the participating agencies, as well as other subject matter experts from the participating agencies as needed, to carry out the stipulations of the MOU; and

The commitment of the Agencies to designate senior level officials to serve as members of a Core Working Group, which the Department of the Interior will Chair.

Secretary Salazar also announced that Interior plans to provide a report on the Department's Tribal Listening Sessions on Sacred Sites. Last year, the Department held several Tribal Listening Sessions across the country to elicit tribal and spiritual leaders concerns regarding sacred sites. A copy of the action plan is available here.