Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON, DC. – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar joined leaders from the 566 federally recognized tribes and senior government officials today at the White House Tribal Nations Conference hosted by President Obama. The conference, the fourth held during the Obama Administration, continues to build upon the President's commitment to strengthen the nation to nation relationship with Indian Country.

Held at the Department of the Interior, the conference also featured remarks from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury Neal Wolin, Acting Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank, Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis.

Secretary Salazar's remarks, as prepared for delivery, are below:

A Moral Imperative: Building a Strong Foundation for a Prosperous Future for American Indians and Alaska Natives

Good morning.

Thank you all for coming. I know many tribal leaders have traveled across the nation to be at the fourth White House Tribal Nations Conference, and I see many familiar faces in the audience.

From the beginning, President Obama has made it a top priority to help bring real and lasting change in Indian Country and to open a new chapter with the First Americans.

When President Obama took office, he pledged that his Administration would uphold not just a government-to-government relationship with tribes, but a nation-to-nation relationship.

In close consultation with leaders here and across Indian Country, we have done just that.

This Administration has a comprehensive agenda to reform, repair and rebuild federal relations with Indian Country to ensure that American Indians and Alaska Natives get the opportunities they deserve.

This means respecting the inherent sovereignty of tribal nations and making sure the federal government is honoring its commitments.

This means fulfilling our trust responsibilities to tribal nations and trust resources.

This means working cooperatively to build stronger economies and safer communities.

And this means helping fulfill your vision for your nations; helping your communities achieve their promise; helping your cultures flourish.

You'll be hearing from leaders from across the government today, but I want to spend a few minutes

talking about what we've done at Interior over the past four years – because the accomplishments are real, and the impacts they will have are meaningful.

We have been lucky to have had Larry Echo Hawk serve as a strong advocate for three years in his role as Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. And we are lucky to see his leadership carried on through Del Laverdure, and now through our newly confirmed Assistant Secretary, Kevin Washburn.

As you know, Deputy Secretary David J. Hayes, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Larry Roberts, and Solicitor Hilary Tompkins are also leading the charge when it comes to important issues that impact Indian Country.

With their help, and with the help of many people in this room – like Jefferson Keel and Jackie Johnson with the National Congress of American Indians – we have seen real results that are helping to build safer, stronger, healthier, and more prosperous Indian communities.

First, we have worked to restore tribal homelands. When we started, there seemed to be a de facto moratorium on trust land applications. In 2007 and 2008, Interior had acquired only 15,000 acres in trust on behalf of tribes.

Thanks to the great work of BIA Director Mike Black and his team, since 2009, Interior broke that logjam and has acquired more than 190,000 acres of land into trust. We've processed over 1,000 requests for land acquisitions that will allow for agriculture, energy, infrastructure, health and housing projects to move forward and strengthen tribal economies.

Moreover, Indian County deserves responsive and responsible business practices when it comes to acquiring land into trust and managing funds generated from such lands. That's why we've established a Trust Reform Commission to undertake a forward-looking, comprehensive evaluation of our trust management.

We know that the federal government must be more transparent and customer-friendly in managing Indian funds and assets, and I look forward to receiving the Commission's recommendations. I am grateful for the leadership that Chairwoman Fawn Sharp and Commissioners Tex Hall, Peterson Zah, Bob Anderson and Stacey Leeds are providing on this important effort.

Of course, one of the most significant developments regarding our trust responsibilities was when President Obama signed the Claims Resolution Act of 2010.

Just last week, the settlement of the Cobell litigation cleared the final legal hurdle. Now, after more than 16 years of contentious litigation that created a great fissure between the United States and American Indians, this painful chapter in our nation's history is over.

The $3.4 billion Cobell settlement has the potential to profoundly change and improve the lives of American Indians and the administration of American Indian trusts.

At Interior, we will be working to implement the Trust Land Consolidation Program that will free up land for the benefit of tribal communities. We need to work together to solve the fractionation problem that has plagued Indian Country for decades.

I am pleased that, as part of the settlement, Elouise Cobell's legacy will include the $60 million

Scholarship Fund for American Indian and Alaska Native students.

Building on Cobell, the Administration has engaged tribes in nation-to-nation negotiations that have led to 59 additional settlements totaling over $1.1 billion to resolve long-standing trust accounting and trust management claims.

The Cobell settlement – and the work to successfully settle tribal trust cases – marks the beginning of true trust reform and is nothing short of historic.

Second, the Obama administration is working to strengthen tribal economies through the development of water, energy, and infrastructure projects on tribal lands.

This starts with a reenergized commitment to meeting the critical water needs of Native American communities. Water is the lifeblood of communities, and President Obama has signed landmark legislation on six historic water rights settlements.

I have been honored to travel over the past three years across the country to help celebrate the water settlements and projects that will deliver water to these communities – many for the first time. The settlements include: Taos Pueblo and Aamodt case pueblos, including the Pojoaque, Tesuque, San Ildefonso, and Nambe pueblos in New Mexico; as well as the Crow Tribe in Montana; the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Arizona; the Navajo Nation in New Mexico; and the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes in Nevada.

These settlements will provide more than $2 billion to some of the most poverty-stricken regions in the nation. For these communities, the permanent water supply will vastly improve their quality of life and will offer greater economic security both now and in the future.

When it comes to Indian gaming, we have made timely and balanced decisions on applications based on law and regulations. Rather than letting applications languish, we've made 23 decisions in 29 months. These projects have the potential to add tens of thousands of jobs in Indian Country.

We are also working to engage tribal governments in the President's all-of-the-above energy strategy to safely and responsibly expand our nation's domestic energy resources.

We know that tribal lands hold great capacity for solar, wind and geothermal projects, and we are committed to helping you unlock that potential. In June, we approved the first-ever, utility-scale solar project on tribal lands. The Moapa Band of Paiute Indians of Nevada partnered on this trailblazing effort to develop a 350-megawatt solar energy project that will help power over 100,000 homes and generate 400 jobs at peak construction.

And in October, I was on the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota with Chairman Tex Hall, Del Laverdure and Mike Black to approve the Three Affiliated Tribes 'land-into-trust' application. The land will be used to build the first new refinery in the United States in more than 30 years - and the only tribally-owned refinery in the lower 48 states.

These two projects are historic in nature, not just for their energy but also for their potential to transform the tribes' economies. We can, and should, do more of this across the nation.

These same principles of enhancing tribal self-determination and promoting meaningful economic

development opportunities were embodied in the HEARTH Act that many worked so hard to enact into law, and which President Obama signed earlier this year.

And this past month, Interior took another step to give tribes and individual Indians greater control over their own lands with the finalization of the most sweeping reform of federal surface leasing regulations in more than 50 years. The new regulations remove bureaucratic red tape and streamline the approval for home ownership, expedite economic development and spur renewable energy.

With the HEARTH Act and the new leasing regulations in place, individuals and tribes will have the ability to do fundamental things, like buy a home or build a business. Third, President Obama is investing in the next generation through our efforts to create educational opportunities in Indian Country.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, along with Bureau of Indian Education Acting Director Brian Drapeaux and national experts, are heavily engaged in developing a national education reform agenda that will better serve Indian children.

Just yesterday, Education and BIE signed an agreement to bolster cooperation and coordination between the two agencies to better support Indian schools and serve Indian children.

And the two agencies have entered into an agreement to strengthen our efforts to bring Native languages and cultures back into the Indian education framework.

We can and must do better by our young people.

Fourth, the Obama administration is working to help build safer communities.

We are combating violence in Indian Country where crime rates far exceed national averages.

President Obama signed the Tribal Law and Order Act, which will allow us to accelerate our focus on safe tribal communities.

We are putting more law enforcement officers in Indian communities, and improving training and equipment.

We are revamping the recruiting process for Bureau of Indian Affairs law officers, increasing the number of applicants for those positions by 500 percent – and overseeing the largest hiring increase in BIA history.

Last year, we completed the first pilot of an intense community policing program on four reservations experiencing high crime rates. We saw promising results – a combined reduction of violent crime of 35% after the first 24 months. Now, 12 months later, we have seen this drop continue to a combined 55% reduction. We have since expanded the program to two additional reservations, where we are starting to see great progress.

Finally, government-to-government consultation is a keystone to our nation-to-nation relationship. Responding to the charge the President gave to us, all Cabinet Secretaries are working to develop a consultation policy to guide their Departments.

With the advice of tribal leaders, Interior released our consultation policy in 2011, which will serve as

an enduring, living document that guides everything we do and will more effectively engage tribal leaders in policy development.

This makes for a more predictable and stream-lined process and reflects our heartfelt commitment to an open, comprehensive and effective consultation policy.

We'll look to this policy when it comes to critical issues, such as identifying and avoiding impacts to the sites that you hold sacred. In fact, today I'm pleased to announce that five government agencies – Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Interior and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation – have entered into an agreement to bolster our coordination and best management practices when it comes these sacred sites.

These accomplishments are significant. As one tribal chair told me at last year's White House Tribal Nations Conference, President Obama's administration has done more on tribal issues in two years than has been accomplished in the last 20.

But there is no doubt that much more needs to be done.

That's why we're working with you and the Congress to fix the Carcieri decision to ensure that we can continue to make strong progress on restoring homelands for all tribes.

That's why we'll continue our record efforts to resolve trust mismanagement claims in a fair and reasonable way. And that's why we'll continue to fight for healthy budgets that will support Indian Country's priorities.

We all know that the federal government's history with Indian nations is long and troubled. We live with a somber legacy of injustice and broken promises.

For me, and for this Administration, that memory drives our commitment to do right and to turn a new page in the relationship between our nations. It is nothing short of a moral imperative.

I am proud of what we have done together over the past four years to build a solid foundation – a lasting framework - for a bright, prosperous and more fulfilling future for the First Americans.

Let's keep up the momentum.

Thank you.

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