Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 26, 2012—Officials from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) have signed two memorandums of understanding (MOU) designed to foster improved access to USDA and BIA programs by tribes and tribal members. The memorandums apply to programs administered by the Farm Service Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development at USDA, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior (DOI). The MOUs will further improve the important government-to-government relationships and also the services offered between USDA, BIA and the tribal governments and the communities they serve.

“This agreement between USDA and the Bureau of Indian Affairs will help us increase efficiency, reduce redundancy and improve communications and services between our agencies and the tribes,” said Under Secretary for Rural Development Dallas Tonsager. “These improvements will help to spur economic development, strengthen the communities and improve the lives of the people of Indian country."

“We look forward to working closely with USDA to serve Indian Country. American Indian farmers are a vital part of Tribal economies and the nation’s agricultural industry. Agriculture is the backbone of the nation,” BIA Director Mike Black said. “With these MOUs in place, we will be able to work with USDA and its programs as partners in helping American Indian farmers maintain their farms, strengthen the local tribal economies, and bring their produce to market for the benefit of all Americans, and the world.”

"This partnership shows the important role tribal lands play in conservation stewardship in America," NRCS Chief Dave White said. "Landowners across the U.S., including those on tribal lands, contribute to cleaner water and air, healthier soil and better homes for wildlife. This memorandum is one effort of many in which NRCS, BIA and Indian landowners and land users can join together to nurture a better landscape."

“The Farm Service Agency is eager to implement this agreement,” said FSA Administrator Juan M. Garcia. “We respect and honor the centuries of stewardship that the Indian tribes participating in our conservation and farm programs have shown for the land we all share. We are pleased to solidify our partnership with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to conserve the soil, care for our water and air, and help the tribe’s maximize their agricultural production.”

The MOUs set up a framework for consultation, training, coordination, and the provision of technical assistance which will increase the amount of Indian land enrolled under USDA conservation and farm loan programs and improve service delivery on those lands. Farming and animal management, grazing, ranching and related food and agricultural operations will be supported through improved interdepartmental coordination. The MOUs, which are in place for five years, also support establishment of Native rural businesses, renewable energy development, and job creation. Additionally, the BIA will work with Rural Development to increase homeownership, home repair, and rehabilitation opportunities, and improve energy efficiency of homes on Indian lands through improved

coordination of program delivery. Finally, the MOUs will complement the USDA’s Rural Utilities Service (RUS) work with BIA to implement and administer the Substantially Underserved Trust Areas (SUTA) provision of the 2008 Farm Bill to increase affordability and availability of RUS-supported infrastructure on Indian lands.

The MOUs also help further the objectives of the Keepseagle settlement agreement, which resolved a lawsuit regarding past discrimination by USDA against Native American farmers and ranchers concerning its farm loan program.

Since taking office, President Obama's Administration has taken historic steps to improve the lives of rural Americans, put people back to work and build thriving economies in rural communities. From proposing the American Jobs Act to establishing the first-ever White House Rural Council the President is committed to a smarter use of existing Federal resources to foster sustainable economic prosperity and ensure the government is a strong partner for businesses, entrepreneurs and working families in rural communities. The Rural Council is working to break down silos of information and to find areas for better collaboration and improved flexibility in administering government programs and to work closer with local tribal and non-tribal governments, non-profits and private companies to leverage federal support to enhance the services offered to rural beneficiaries. The MOUs are also an important step in implementing the administration’s Administrative Flexibility Initiative in Indian Country that has as its goal to provide greater efficiency and more effective program delivery to Indian Country across the federal government.

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