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First Meeting of Trust Reform Commission set for March, 2012

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Department of the Interior today announced two important steps in the ongoing commitment to fulfilling this nation's trust responsibilities to Native Americans. Today, Interior announced the publication of a draft plan and a request for comment on implementing the potential Cobell Land Consolidation Program. Additionally, Interior announced that the first meeting of the Commission established to undertake a forward-looking, comprehensive evaluation of Interior's trust management of Native American trust funds is set for the first week of March.

"Interior's continued rapport and outreach through consultations with Indian Country are crucial components to accomplishing truly open government-to-government communication," said Deputy Secretary of the Interior David J. Hayes. "We are thankful for the participation of all of the tribal leaders as we continue to move forward with this landmark program in a manner that incorporates tribal priorities and promotes tribal participation in reducing land fractionation in a timely and efficient way."

The Cobell Land Consolidation Program will not be implemented until all court approvals are final; however, Interior has prepared the draft plan to continue the tribal consultation on the development of the program. In May, 2011, the District Court allowed representatives of the United States to communicate with Cobell class regarding to the land consolidation component of the settlement. Since then, Interior has conducted seven regional government-to-government tribal consultations on the issues.

In accordance with the $3.4 billion Cobell Settlement, a $1.9 billion land consolidation fund is to be used to purchase fractionated interests in trust from willing sellers to benefit tribal communities and aid in land consolidation. Up to $60 million of the $1.9 billion will be set aside to provide scholarships for post secondary higher education and vocational training for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Today's publication in the Federal Register opens a 45-day comment period on the draft implementation plan that seeks to remedy the proliferation of thousands of new trust accounts caused by the increasing subdivision or "fractionation" of trust and restricted fee land interests through succeeding generations. The draft implementation plan proposes a voluntary buy-back and consolidation of fractionated trust and restricted fee land interests that would occur over a 10-year period after the Cobell Settlement becomes final.

Deputy Secretary Hayes also announced that the first meeting of the National Commission on Indian Trust Administration and Reform is scheduled for March 1-2, 2012 in at the Interior Department in Washington, D.C. The March meeting will mark the first time the five recently named members of the Commission will meet to move forward on their comprehensive evaluation of Interior's management and administration of the trust assets, as well as recommendations for improvement.

“Building upon the progress made with the historic Cobell Settlement, this commission will help usher in a new era of trust administration,” added Hayes. “Our trust administration must be more transparent, responsive, customer-friendly and accountable in managing these substantial funds and assets.”

More information on the Cobell Trust Land Consolidation Program can be found at: www.doi.gov/cobell.

The Cobell Land Consolidation Draft Plan can be found here.

The public notice of the National Commission on Indian Trust Administration and Reform can be found here.

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