Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
For Immediate Release: August 6, 2008
Print PDF

WASHINGTON - Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and Economic Development - Indian Affairs George T. Skibine today announced that the Office of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) have been fully reconnected to the Internet. The Office of the Chief Information Officer – Indian Affairs (OCIO-IA) has successfully reconnected 5,000 computer users in 148 Indian Affairs locations across the country. This accomplishment occurred one month ahead of schedule.

“I want to thank the public and the tribes for their patience during the time we have been offline,” Skibine said. “Internet connectivity will enable Indian Affairs employees to use web technologies to improve business processes and customer interactions for better and more efficient communications with those we serve.”

On December 5, 2001, the federal judge in a class action lawsuit, Cobell, et al., v. Secretary of the Interior, et al., entered a temporary restraining order requiring the Department to disconnect from the Internet all information technology systems that housed or provided access to individual Indian trust data on the basis of perceived risks to that data. On December 17, 2001, a Consent Order was entered that continued the prohibition and established a process for the Department to obtain permission from the court to reconnect affected bureaus on a case-by-case basis.

Parts of the Department were permitted to reconnect in 2002. However, the five offices that work closely with Indian trust data remained off the Internet. On May 14, 2008, U.S. District Judge James Robertson, the presiding judge in the case, vacated the Consent Order thus allowing those offices to reconnect. On May 23, 2008, BIA offices in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area were connected followed by offices in Albuquerque, N.M., on June 24, 2008. As of July 28, all BIA regional offices, agencies, and field offices still off-line were connected.

“I am extremely proud of how the Indian Affairs organization effectively collaborated to accomplish this historic milestone in record time through proven program management and information technology best practices,” said Indian Affairs CIO Sanjeev Bhagowalia. “We must continue to follow the policies and procedures that have been established as we use the Internet to better serve and communicate with Indian Country. We have instituted policies and mandatory training so that everyone is aware of each employee’s role in ensuring the security of Indian Affairs’ systems.”

Indian Affairs is responsible for fulfilling the Interior Department’s trust responsibilities to individual Indian and tribal trust beneficiaries, as well as promoting tribal self-determination, self-governance and economic development for the nation’s 562 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and their 1.9 million members.

-DOI-