Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Washington DC – Department of the Interior's Acting Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Aurene Martin applauds the American Indian firefighting crews that were dispatched to assist with the recovery of the space shuttle Columbia, and its crew. The Shuttle broke apart during re-entry February 1, 2003, and is spread over a 500 square-mile area, much of it heavily wooded.

"During times of national tragedies or natural disasters, American Indians are always willing to help our Nation by providing manpower, financial assistance or spiritual comfort to those in need," Acting Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Aurene Martin said. "We are very proud of the firefighters and other American Indians who are helping with this critical effort."

Alerted to the fact that they were being dispatched to the area on Tuesday morning, seventeen members of the Cherokee Firedancers, fifteen from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and two from the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma along with fire crews from the Muskogee (Creek) Nation, the Iowa Tribe and Pawnee Tribe were ready to roll by Wednesday.

The request for assistance came from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the crews were mobilized as part of a four-crew module that was dispatched by the AOICC (Arkansas-Oklahoma Interagency Coordination Center) located in Hot Springs, Arkansas, which handles crew mobilization efforts for both the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs sponsored tribal crews from the state of Oklahoma. The Muskogee (Creek) Nation fire crew is sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the other three fire crews are under contract with the U.S. Forest Service to spend the summer fighting fires across the United States. This is the first time they have been called on to help with a national disaster. The fire crews traveled to Nacogdoches County, Texas where they will setup camp in the 179 acre Angelina National Forest and work the next 14 days searching for metal debris.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs has responsibility for fulfilling the Department's trust responsibility to American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and individuals as well as promoting tribal self-determination, education and economic development. The Assistant Secretary also oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is responsible for providing services to approximately 1.4 million American Indians and Alaska Natives.

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