Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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For Immediate Release: June 9, 1998
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Bison and the American Indian people have a symbiotic relationship that needs to be honored and respected. After a visit to the Ft. Belknap Indian reservation in Montana, Assistant Secretary Kevin Gover is encouraging American Indians everywhere to let their voices be heard in determining the outcome of the current controversy over the management of the bison herd in Yellowstone National Park.

At the request of the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative, a BIA-sponsored program working to restore buffalo to Tribal lands, and the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes of the Ft. Belknap reservation, Gover toured the Tribes' bison-restoration and prairie-conservation project and came away impressed. "It is amazing how the restoration of the buffalo to native lands has impacted this Tribe and the other Tribes that have undertaken similar efforts," said Gover. The restoration of the buffalo to American Indian lands has been a great success for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative. Many American Indians believe that when the buffalo is returned to its rightful healthy place among the Tribes, that the Tribes will also rise again to health: spiritually, economically and physically. "Most people do not fully understand that the spiritual connection between the Tribes and this majestic animal is more than symbolic," stated Gover, "We are seeing a rebirth of spirit and pride among the Tribes and it is not coincidental that this is coming with the return of the bison to Tribal lands."

The ITBC has been engaged with the Department of the Interior, the Department of Agriculture, and the State of Montana in the current crisis over the bison herd at Yellowstone National Park. Two winters ago, the State of Montana killed nearly one-third of the Yellowstone bison herd when they left the park in search of winter forage. This slaughter was extremely offensive to American Indians, and ITBC has been working to ensure a slaughter like this can never happen again. So far, the Tribes have not been allowed a place at the table while this issue is being decided. The Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, and the State of Montana recently released an Environmental Impact Statement concerning the management of the Yellowstone herd, and the period for public comment allows American Indians the opportunity for their voices to be heard. Gover encouraged all Tribal members to raise their voices during the public comment period. "The Tribes deserve a place at the table when this issue is decided," stated Gover, "I will do everything I can to protect our brothers the buffalo, but it will take all of our voices to make a difference." Gover stated that the bison need to be treated like wild animals and allowed to roam, but if the parties involved will not agree to natural ranging of the bison, that the Tribes should be involved in the solution. "For centuries, the bison provided for our people, now it is our tum. The American Indian is the natural guardian of the bison."