Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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For Immediate Release: January 13, 1982
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The United States' top Indian official, Interior Assistant Secretary Ken Smith, told 350 Indian businessmen January 13 that Indian reservations need businesses that are "competent and competitive and are going to endure to provide jobs and services for the community... because they earn the money they make and they also earn respect".

Smith, addressing the Minority Business Contractors Association of North Dakota, stressed the importance to reservation communities of "well managed, soundly established Indian enterprises." He said the reservations do not need more government-funded make-work jobs.

A Wasco Indian who ran the very successful tribal enterprises of the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon before coming to Washington, D.C., last year, Smith has consistently told Indian groups they must be less dependent on the Federal government. "We should use and develop our own resources, break our addiction to easy-come, easy-go Federal money and achieve real economic independence," Smith told the Indian contractors.

Smith said that he was seeking to establish a $10 million fund to be used to help tribes plan and carry out development ventures with private capital and in joint ventures with private industry. He said his plan would “provide Indians with up-front expert examination of ventures before capital is put at risk.” He said the Indians need to build a record of successes to bring back to 11 0MB and Congress if we hope to get additional funding of this kind.

"The Department of the Interior, Smith said, would continue to support and implement the provisions of the Indian preference policy and the Buy Indian Act, which permit the non-competitive awarding of government contracts to Indian firms. He added, however, that these laws "can never be an excuse for inferior or non-competitive performance."

Smith said the Indian businessmen had a special value and importance in the Indian community. "Though you are bearing the risks and the burdens as individuals, your success brings benefits to the whole Indian community." Members of the North Dakota Minority Contractors Association, he said, did more than $70 million in business in the past year.

Smith's itinerary included a visit to the Devils Lake Sioux Manufacturing Company on the Fort Totten Reservation in North Dakota and meetings at Aberdeen, South Dakota and Minneapolis, Minnesota, with Bureau of Indian Affairs area officials and with tribal leaders.