Coeur D'Alene, Umatilla and Gila River agreements will facilitate purchases to individual landowners under Buy-Back Program

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WASHINGTON – Deputy Secretary of the Interior Michael Connor today announced that the Department has signed three additional agreements to facilitate the purchase of individual interests in fractionated trust lands and consolidate ownership for the tribes with jurisdiction. Agreements with the Coeur D'Alene Tribe of the Coeur D'Alene Reservation (Idaho), Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (Ore.), and the Gila River Indian Community of the Gila River Indian Reservation (Ariz.) detail what each tribal government will do to help implement the Program, such as appraisals, owner outreach, and education.

To date, the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Buy-Back Program) has made nearly 20,000 purchase offers to owners of fractionated interests. The Program has successfully concluded transactions worth more than $62 million and has restored the equivalent of more than 177,000 acres of land to tribal governments.

"We are encouraged by the growing enthusiasm for the Buy-Back Program across Indian Country, and the increased engagement by tribal nations to participate in its implementation," said Deputy Secretary Connor, who joined tribal leaders in a signing ceremony today. "As part of President Obama's commitment to help strengthen Native American communities, we will continue to implement the Program as transparently and aggressively as possible, but we know that it will succeed only though nation-to-nation cooperation. Our partnerships with these tribal nations will be critical to ensuring that individuals are aware of this historic opportunity to strengthen tribal sovereignty by supporting the consolidation of tribal lands."

Land fractionation is a serious problem across Indian Country. As lands are passed down through generations, they gain more owners. Many tracts now have hundreds and even thousands of individual owners. Because it is difficult to gain landowner consensus, the lands often lie idle and cannot be used for any beneficial purpose.

There are now more than 245,000 owners of three million fractionated interests, spanning approximately 150 Indian reservations, who are eligible to participate in the Buy-Back Program.

"Since the very beginning of the Buy-Back Program, we have said that its success on each reservation will depend on the willingness of tribal leaders to engage with us in moving this important initiative forward. In the agreements signed today, these tribal leaders are offering valuable support that will help to insure the success of the program on their reservations," said Kevin K. Washburn, Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, who also participated in today's signing ceremony. "We thank them for their commitment to the success of the program."

The Buy-Back Program was created to implement the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement. The Settlement provided $1.9 billion to consolidate fractional land interests across Indian Country. The Buy-Back Program allows interested individual owners to receive payments for voluntarily selling their land. Consolidated interests are immediately transferred to tribal governments and stay in trust for uses benefiting the tribes and their members.

“We are pleased that the Department of the Interior recognizes that fractionation is a problem throughout Indian Country,” said Coeur D’Alene Chairman Chief Allan. “The Coeur D’Alene Tribe has worked collaboratively with Interior from the inception of the Buy-Back Program to develop a plan to address this issue. We are proud of the plan we put together and appreciative that Interior saw that the Coeur D’Alene Tribe is well prepared and stands ready to participate. We’re anxious to get started addressing fractionated ownership of trust allotments on our reservation.”

Interior is entering into cooperative agreements that are flexible and responsive to the specific needs and unique circumstances of each tribal government and location involved. The agreements showcase the active role that tribes can have, which is intended to improve the Program’s effectiveness and efficiency while minimizing administrative costs.

“The Umatilla Tribes are looking forward to implementing the Cobell Settlement through the Department of the Interior’s Land Buy-Back Program,” said Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation Board of Trustees Chairman Gary Burke. “We are well positioned to work with owners of fractionated allotments in purchasing back our lands for the common interest of our tribal members. We have and will continue to develop land management plans that will ensure our survival now and for future generations.”

In addition, sales will result in up to $60 million in contributions to the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund. This donation is in addition to the amounts paid to individual sellers, so it will not reduce the amount landowners receive for their interests.

The Gila River Indian Community has entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the Department, rather than a cooperative agreement, because the Community is helping implement the Program using its own resources. More information on how tribal governments can participate in the Buy-Back Program is available here.

“The Gila River Indian Community is looking forward to participating in the Land Buy-Back Program,” said Governor Gregory Mendoza of the Gila River Indian Community. “Our reservation is one of the most fractionated in the country, but is uniquely positioned to use the Program to advance tribal energy and economic development opportunities that will benefit our entire Community.”

Landowners with interests at Coeur D’Alene, Umatilla or Gila River can contact the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at (888) 678-6836 to get more information about the potential to sell land so that it can be returned to the tribe or to register their information.