More than $61.2 million in accepted offers has been paid to landowners, consolidating and restoring nearly 175,000 acres to tribes

Media Contact: Interior_Press@ios.doi.gov
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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Deputy Secretary of the Interior Michael Connor today announced a schedule through 2015 for the continued implementation of the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Program) that identifies locations representing more than half of all the fractional interests and half of all owners across Indian Country.

There are more than 245,000 owners of more than 3 million fractionated interests, spanning 150 Indian reservations, who are eligible to participate in the Program. Approximately 90 percent of all of the fractionated lands available for purchase under the Cobell Settlement are in 40 of the 150 locations.

“Implementing the Buy-Back Program in as fair, transparent and equitable a manner as possible is a top priority for the Obama Administration,” said Deputy Secretary Connor, who chairs the oversight board, created to ensure the highest level of accountability within the Interior Department. “That means collaborating with a diverse group of tribal nations to ensure that landowners are aware of this unique opportunity, receive answers to questions, and are fully informed to make timely decisions about their land. The goal of the Buy-Back Program is to unlock fractionated lands so they can benefit tribal communities. We remain committed to reaching as many interested landowners as possible.”

To date, the Buy-Back Program has made nearly 20,000 purchase offers to owners of fractionated interests. The Program has successfully concluded transactions worth more than $61.2 million and has restored nearly 175,000 acres of land to tribal governments. The Buy-Back Program has identified the following American Indian communities (listed in alphabetical order) where land consolidation activities – such as planning, outreach, mapping, mineral evaluations, appraisals or acquisitions – are expected to take place through the end of 2015:

- Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation
- Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of the Cheyenne River Reservation
- Coeur D’Alene Tribe of the Coeur D’Alene Reservation
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation
- Crow Tribe
- Fort Belknap Indian Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation of Montana
- Gila River Indian Community of the Gila River Indian Reservation
- Lummi Tribe of the Lummi Reservation
- Makah Indian Tribe of the Makah Indian Reservation
- Navajo Nation

- Northern Cheyenne Tribe of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation
- Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Pine Ridge Reservation
- Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation
- Quapaw Tribe of Indians
- Quinault Tribe of the Quinault Reservation
- Rosebud Sioux Tribe of the Rosebud Indian Reservation
- Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation
- Squaxin Island Tribe of the Squaxin Island Reservation
- Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of North and South Dakota
- Swinomish Indians of the Swinomish Reservation

The Program hopes to schedule additional locations, including in the Midwest and Pacific Regions and those where tribes have expressed interest, as capacity and resources allow.

“Today’s announcement is part of our ongoing effort to provide timely and transparent information to tribal governments and individuals planning to participate in the Buy-Back Program,” said Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn. “The schedule announced today will be flexible, allowing for implementation at additional locations. This flexibility will allow us to learn from each buy-back effort and apply lessons learned for each successive location.”

The Department will hold a public listening session with Deputy Secretary Connor on May 29 in Portland, Oregon, to further discuss the status of the Program’s implementation. A federal register announcement for the listening session can be found here.

To ensure that the Program will be implemented at as many locations as possible, the Department will continue to use ‘purchase ceilings’ that fairly and flexibly target available dollars for paying owners at each reservation based on the proportional degree of fractionation. The ceilings are planning tools, also developed during tribal consultation, to ensure that all available funds are not expended at just a few locations and that funds will be available to purchase interests at locations to be scheduled in the future.

Through an open solicitation from November 2013 to March 2014, the Department received more than 50 letters of interest or cooperative agreement applications from tribes interested in participating in the Program. These agreements, which will be developed depending on the specific circumstances of each location, will outline how implementation will occur in cooperation with tribes. Tribes have the opportunity to actively participate in the process, which will improve the Program’s effectiveness and efficiency while minimizing administrative costs. Agreements allow for resources to be provided to tribal governments to facilitate activities such as outreach and education, notary services, and location of owners.

The expressions of interest and applications received from tribes were considered as part of key criteria used to guide Program scheduling. In addition to tribal readiness, the Program makes scheduling decisions using criteria developed through government-to-government consultations and originally released in 2012. These include: severity of fractionation; diversity of geographic locations; grouping locations to maximize efficiency and resources; appraisal complexity; level of interested sellers, and cost and time efficiency. Using these factors, the Department will continue to implement the Program in a flexible manner to realize efficiencies wherever possible. Periodic updates and potential changes to the schedule will be provided as implementation continues.

The Program implements the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement, which provided $1.9 billion to purchase fractional interests in trust or restricted land from willing sellers at fair market value within a 10-year period. Individuals who choose to sell their interests will receive payments directly in their IIM accounts. Consolidated interests are immediately restored to tribal trust ownership for uses benefiting the reservation community and tribal members.

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.

For more information, go to: http://www.doi.gov/buybackprogram.