Contributions from Land Buy-Back Program will help fund education and training opportunities for American Indian and Alaska Native students

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WASHINGTON – The Department of the Interior today announced that an additional $10 million has been transferred to the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund (the Fund), bringing the total amount contributed so far to nearly $30 million. Funded in part by the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Buy-Back Program), and authorized by the Cobell Settlement, the Fund is designed to be a permanent endowment which provides financial assistance through scholarships to American Indian and Alaska Native students wishing to pursue post-secondary and graduate education and training.

“I am thrilled that the first Cobell scholarships have been awarded. Graduating from college and law school was life changing for me, and wouldn't have been possible without financial support,” said Interior Solicitor Hilary Tompkins, a member of the Navajo Nation, who negotiated the Cobell settlement for the Interior Department. “The Cobell scholarship program is key to advancing self-determination by opening doors to the next generation of leaders in Indian Country.”

The Fund, administered by the American Indian Graduate Center (AIGC), will disburse approximately $2 million in funds in its first round of awards over the next several months. Scholarship recipients represent more than 80 tribal nations who will be attending more than 175 different academic institutions. The Cobell Board of Trustees is responsible for the oversight and supervision of the activities of the fund’s administering organization.

The Buy-Back Program was created to implement the land consolidation component of the *Cobell settlement*, which provided $1.9 billion to purchase fractionated interests in trust or restricted land from willing landowners. Consolidated interests are transferred to tribal government ownership for uses benefiting the reservation community and tribal members.

Interior makes quarterly transfers to the scholarship fund – up to a total of $60 million – as a result of Land Buy-Back Program sales. The amount contributed is based on a formula required under the terms of the Cobell settlement that sets aside funding contributions based on the value of the fractionated interests sold.

“AIGC has been working diligently over the last few months to receive, process and distribute the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund,” said Joan Currier, Interim Executive Director of the AIGC. “We received more than 2,500 applications from talented students, and we were able to award $2 million in scholarships to more than 340 undergraduate and graduate students for 2015/2016. This truly is an exciting opportunity for Indian students. We are working with the Cobell Board of Trustees and are reviewing the application and selection process as we look towards the next academic year. We encourage all students to reapply for 2016/2017, starting in January 2016, at AIGCS.org.”

“We are delighted with the significant transfer to the Cobell Scholarship Fund. The latest distribution aids our mission of carrying out the vision of Elouise Cobell to enhance educational opportunities for American Indians and Alaskan Native students,” said Alex Pearl, Chairman of the Cobell Board of Trustees. “With the beginning of the new school year and the initial distribution of funds to recipients, we are aware now more than ever of the quality, capabilities, and talents of our tribal youth. Indian Country is not immune from the national concern about rising student debt and access to education. Our Board understands the financial aid needs in Indian Country are enormous. We are committed to creating a uniquely tuned scholarship program attentive to the needs and issues of Native students. The Cobell Board is grateful for the leadership demonstrated by Solicitor Hilary Tompkins and looks forward to continue working with her and the Department of the Interior in this unique shared effort to minimize the barriers faced by Native students in accomplishing their educational goals.”

Providing Native youth with increased access to higher education opportunities supports the Obama Administration’s Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) initiative to remove barriers to Native youth’s success.

Since 2013, the Buy-Back Program has paid nearly $685 million to individual landowners and restored the equivalent of more than 1.4 million acres of land to tribal governments.

Landowners can contact the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at 888-678-6836 or visit their local Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST) to update their contact information, ask questions about their land or purchase offers, and learn about financial planning resources.

More information and detailed frequently asked questions are available at http://www.doi.gov/buybackprogram to help individuals make informed decisions about their land.
