Written Comments Welcome through April 20, 2015

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LAVEEN, AZ – More than 150 tribal leaders and individual landowners joined Department of the Interior Deputy Secretary Michael Connor and Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Kevin Washburn at the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Buy-Back Program) 2015 Listening Session yesterday. The event, held on the Gila River Indian Community, allowed Interior officials to share updates and hear directly from tribal communities about how the Program can best be implemented across Indian Country.

In particular, many individuals with fractional land interests at the Navajo Nation attended the event. Local, targeted outreach events will occur in the coming months in coordination with the tribe to provide opportunities for further landowner engagement as the Program is implemented.

“We must do all we can to give landowners a meaningful chance to participate in the Program and receive compensation for their fractional interests, many of which are simply unusable because of the degree of fractionation,” said Deputy Secretary Connor. “We are focused on ensuring that landowners are aware of the Program and are given every opportunity to make informed decisions about the potential sale of their land at fair market value.”

“Tribal feedback has been a critical component of the Buy-Back Program since its inception,” added Assistant Secretary Washburn. “The Buy-Back Program and tribal leaders are working together to ensure that landowners are aware of the opportunity to sell land interests for the benefit of both the landowner and tribal communities. We must work together to make sure this Program has the best impact possible on tribal communities.”

As part of President Obama’s commitment to help strengthen Native American communities, the Buy-Back 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 10 years. Consolidated interests are immediately restored to tribal trust ownership for uses benefiting the reservation community and tribal members.

“The Gila River Indian Community views our implementation of the Land Buy Back Program to be a very successful one from the Community’s perspective. We had vision to use these funds to help develop a utility corridor, and we appreciate that the Program is working with us to make that vision a reality. Today, while we seek to implement details of the utility corridor, we are on the verge of an amazing achievement, one that deserves to be celebrated. And, we hope other tribal nations look to our experience as a base to consider when developing their own strategic plans for using the funds available through the Buy-Back Program,” said **Gila River Indian Community Governor Stephen Roe Lewis**.

Thus far the Buy-Back Program has paid more than $360 million to individual landowners and has

restored the equivalent of almost 560,000 acres of land to tribal governments.

Tribal leaders and landowners who were unable to attend the Listening Session are encouraged to submit written comments, which **must be received by April 20, 2015,** as described in the Federal Register notice about the session.

In recognition of the great value that comes from early awareness, Interior's Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians helped begin the day by discussing financial awareness with a class at the Gila River Indian Community. Additional resources can be found here.

Landowners can contact the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at 888-678-6836 with questions about their purchase offers and to update their contact information. Individuals can also visit their local Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST) or Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) office, or find more information at www.doi.gov/buybackprogram/landowners in order to make informed decisions about their land.
