Land Buy-Back Program to begin implementation at Squaxin Island and Swinomish Reservations

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Deputy Secretary of the Interior Michael Connor today announced that the Department has signed two additional agreements with tribal nations in Washington State through the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Buy-Back Program).

The agreements with the Squaxin Island Tribe of the Squaxin Island Reservation and the Swinomish Indians of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community detail what each tribal government will do to help implement the Buy-Back Program, which facilitates the purchase of individual interests in fractionated trust lands and consolidates ownership for the tribes with jurisdiction. The agreements also detail what resources the tribal governments will provide to facilitate outreach and education.

“The success of the Buy-Back Program hinges on tribal leadership, tribal participation, and tribal facilitation,” said Deputy Secretary Connor. “We must work together to ensure that landowners are given the information they need to make informed decisions about their land through this voluntary program. We look forward to working with the Squaxin Island Tribe and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community to take advantage of this historic opportunity to strengthen tribal sovereignty by supporting the consolidation of tribal lands for the benefit of each tribal nation.”

The Department has thus far entered into cooperative or other agreements with more than a dozen sovereign tribal nations. Tribes have the opportunity to actively participate in the Buy Back Program, including identifying acquisition priorities, conducting appraisals, and leading owner outreach. Each cooperative agreement between the Buy Back Program and individual tribes is unique in time, scope and responsibilities based on the expressed interests of the tribe.

The agreements showcase the active role that tribes can have, which is intended to improve the Buy Back Program’s effectiveness and efficiency while minimizing administrative costs.

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 more than 245,000 owners of 3 million fractionated interests, spanning approximately 150 Indian reservations, who are eligible to participate in the Buy-Back Program.

“Buying back our homelands has been a tribal goal and an emphasis during my 28 plus years as a council member,” said **David Lopeman, Chairman Squaxin Island Tribe**. “Our Island is one of the last pristine beaches without commercial development in the Puget Sound. Fractionation threatens our ability to keep these lands in trust, and to govern our reservation, and protect the vast natural

resources of healthy shellfish for our tribal harvesters and Seafood Enterprise. We are grateful for the resources provided by the Buy-Back Program to purchase fractionated interests." To date, the Buy Back Program has made more than 46,000 purchase offers to owners of fractionated interests, successfully concluding transactions worth nearly $330 million and restoring the equivalent of nearly 540,000 acres of land to tribal ownership.

"Our Swinomish reservation is not a large reservation, but our people face the same challenges brought about by fractionation as other tribes, no matter their size," said **Brian Cladoosby, Chairman of the Swinomish Indian Senate**. "As a community, we know that the decisions we make today will affect the next seven generations, and consolidating land ownership on the Swinomish Indian Reservation helps fulfill our duty to those generations."

The Department has announced 42 locations where land consolidation activities such as planning, outreach, mapping, mineral evaluations, appraisals or acquisitions are expected to take place through the middle of 2017. These communities represent 83 percent of all outstanding fractional interests across Indian Country.

There are several things that tribal leaders can do to prepare for the Buy-Back Program. More information and resources are available through the Buy-Back Program website.

The Buy-Back Program was created to implement the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement, which 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.

Landowners with interests on the Squaxin Island or Swinomish Reservations can contact the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at (888) 678-6836 with questions or to register their 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: Buy-Back Program/Landowners.