Tribal leasing regulations foster economic development, represent another step furthering tribal self-determination

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For Immediate Release: January 8, 2015
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HOLLYWOOD, Fla. – As part of President Obama's commitment to empowering American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations and strengthening their economies, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and Bureau of Indian Affairs Director Michael Black today joined Seminole Tribal Chairman James E. Billie to formally approve tribal leasing regulations that will help spur investment and commercial development on the Seminole Tribe's reservations.

Upon approval of the tribal regulations by the Department of the Interior, tribes may approve land leases without Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) approval, fostering tribal self-governance in the approval of leases for homes and small businesses in Indian Country.

"The Seminole Tribe of Florida will now decide for itself how it wants to do business on its lands – from making it easier for families to buy and build houses to opening businesses in the communities where they have lived for generations," said Secretary Jewell, who also serves as chair of the White House Council on Native American Affairs. "Today's agreement will encourage economic development and help create jobs while strengthening tribal sovereignty and self-determination by putting these decisions back in the hands of the tribe."

Today's signing ceremony comes on the heels of the White House Tribal Nations Conference held in December 2014, when leaders from all 566 federally recognized tribes were invited to Washington, D.C. to interact directly with the President and senior cabinet and administration officials. The conference – the sixth for the Obama Administration – continues to build on the President's commitment to strengthen the government-to-government relationship with Indian Country.

"This is an important day for the Seminole Tribe, which will be able to process residential and business leases without the need for BIA approval," said Chairman Billie. "This authority will allow the Tribe to better serve its members and create new opportunities for economic development on the Tribe's reservations. We appreciate the Department's assistance in working with the Tribe through the approval process."

"Tribal self-determination means the tribe will now decide how its lands may be used for the good of its members and how it wants to do business on its lands," said BIA Director Black. "The Seminole Tribe's endeavors contribute to the local, state and regional economies and the tribe's leasing initiative will further that economic vitality and contribution."

Tribal council members and several tribal government officials joined Secretary Jewell, Director Black and Chairman Billie during a signing ceremony this morning at Seminole Tribal Headquarters in Hollywood, Florida.

The Seminole Tribe of Florida resides in communities located on six component reservations: Big Cypress, Brighton, Fort Pierce, Hollywood, Immokalee and Tampa. The Tribe expects to use its new authority for business, residential and biomass energy development, as well as for cultural, educational, recreational, spiritual, and other purposes.

Under the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership Act (HEARTH Act), signed by President Obama in July 2012, federally recognized tribes may develop and implement their own laws governing leasing of federal tribal trust lands for residential, business, renewable energy and other purposes. The law provides that such tribes may lease their lands without federal approval, promoting greater investment in tribal communities and job creation, both of which support tribal self-determination.

The Secretary's action today brings to 15 the number of federally recognized tribes with leasing regulations approved under the HEARTH Act. An additional 14 tribes have HEARTH Act applications under current review or modification. A full list of approved regulations and additional information about the HEART Act is available HERE.

The HEARTH Act complements a parallel effort Interior undertook to overhaul the BIA regulations that govern its process for approving surface leases on lands the federal government holds in trust for Indian tribes and individuals. As trustee, Interior manages about 56 million surface acres in Indian Country.

The new regulations were finalized in December 2012 and represent the most comprehensive reform of the BIA's antiquated leasing process. The new regulations fundamentally change the way the BIA does business, providing clarity by identifying specific processes – with enforceable timelines – through which the BIA must review leases. The regulation also establishes separate, simplified processes for residential, business, and renewable energy development, rather than using a "one-size fits all" approach that treats a lease for a single family home the same as a lease for a large wind energy project.
