Discussions with tribal leaders build on President's commitment to strengthen nation-to-nation relationship with Indian Country

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For Immediate Release: December 16, 2010
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WASHINGTON, DC – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar kicked off the Second White House Tribal Nations Conference today, calling the gathering a testament to President Obama's respect for the inherent sovereignty of Indian nations and determination to honor the Nation's commitments to American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

President Obama hosted the conference – the second he has convened since taking office – and delivered keynote remarks to leaders of the 565 federally recognized tribes in the United States. Members of the President's cabinet and other high-ranking Administration officials participated in a series of breakout sessions with tribal leaders, discussing a wide range of social, economic and political challenges facing Indian Country.

At the first White House Tribal Nations Conference last year, the President directed Salazar and other cabinet secretaries to work with tribal leaders to develop a comprehensive agenda to reform, restructure and rebuild federal relations with Indian Country.

Salazar, whose department carries out the Nation's principal duties for Indian Country, highlighted the progress that has been made in fulfilling trust management responsibilities, empowering tribal governments and helping them build safer and stronger communities. The Secretary also discussed the significant work remaining in "building a solid foundation for a bright, prosperous and more fulfilling future for the First Americans."

The full text of the Secretary's remarks as prepared for delivery is below.

Good morning everyone and welcome to the second White House Tribal Nations Conference!

It is an honor to welcome so many distinguished guests to the Department of the Interior for this special occasion.

Today we are joined by the leaders and representatives from the Nation's 565 federally-recognized tribes. I know many of you have traveled a great distance to be here. Thank you for coming.

Today we are also joined by seven Members of the President's Cabinet. It is rare that so many of us are in one place at the same time and it speaks to President Obama's high-level engagement with and commitment to Indian Country.

There are many people who have put in a lot of work to make this conference happen, and I'd like to

take a minute to recognize them:

- *Kimberly Teehee – Senior Policy Advisor to President Obama*
- *Jodi Gillette – White House Deputy Associate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs*
- *Larry Echo Hawk – Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs*
- *Laura Davis –Deputy Chief of Staff, Dept. of the Interior*
- *Kallie Hanley – Special Assistant to the Secretary, Dept. of the Interior*

A little over a year ago – at the first ever White House Tribal Nations Conference – President Obama pledged to you that we would work with American Indian leaders to fulfill our trust responsibilities, to empower tribal governments and to help build safer, stronger and more prosperous tribal communities.

We have made great strides toward reaching these goals.

First, we are working to restore tribal homelands. We are breaking the logjam on trust land applications and streamlining the process as part of the most substantial overhaul of the Department's leasing process in 50 years.

Thanks to the great work of Mike Black, since 2009, the Department has acquired more than 36,000 acres of land in trust on behalf of tribal nations – a 242 percent net increase from the last administration's entire 8 years.

Moreover, Indian County deserves responsive and responsible business practices as we work to meet our obligations to acquire land into trust for tribes.

One of the most significant developments concerning our trust responsibilities occurred last week when the President signed into law the historic Claims Resolution Act of 2010.

Through the leadership of Attorney General Eric Holder and his team, and Deputy Secretary David Hayes and Solicitor Hilary Tompkins here at Interior, we negotiated and achieved enactment of the Cobell settlement.

After 14 years of contentious litigation that included hundreds of motions, seven full trials, held three Interior Secretaries under contempt, and created a great fissure between the United States and tribal nations, this painful chapter in our nation's history has finally been brought to an end.

The $3.4 billion settlement honorably and responsibly addresses long-standing injustices and demonstrates President Obama's commitment to reconciliation and empowerment for Indian nations.

The injection of several billion dollars into Indian Country through the settlement has the potential to profoundly change and improve the administration of American Indian trusts and free up land for the benefit of tribal communities. This settlement will also provide new scholarship opportunities for Indian students.

The Cobell settlement marks the beginning of true trust reform and is nothing short of historic.

I would also like to offer a brief comment about the Carcieri decision, a devastating ruling which reverses 75 years of precedent and says that the Federal government cannot take land into trust for Indian Tribes that were not under Federal jurisdiction in 1934. Taking land into trust is one of the most important functions that the Department of Interior undertakes on behalf of Indian tribes. These lands

allow tribal communities to practice their cultural traditions, to provide housing for tribal members and engage in economic development. The Obama administration is working overtime to deliver a fix that will restore the authority and allow tribes to continue their important work of restoring their homelands.

Second, the Obama administration is working across the agencies, including the Department of Justice, to help build safer communities.

We must do better to combat violence in Indian Country where crime rates far exceed national averages.

This year President Obama signed into law the Tribal Law and Order Act, which will allow us to accelerate our focus on safe tribal communities.

And thanks to an increase in the President's 2009 and 2010 budgets, we are putting more law enforcement officers in Indian communities, and improving training and equipment.

We also are revamping the recruiting process for Bureau of Indian Affairs law officers, increasing the number of applicants for those positions by 500 percent - and we have hired more than 100 new officers this year. That's the largest hiring increase in BIA's history.

This year we also launched an intense community policing pilot program on four reservations experiencing high crime rates. We are already seeing promising results – a reduction of violent crime by at least 5% - and hope to expand the program in the near future.

Third, the Obama administration is working to build strong, prosperous Native American economies.

This starts with a reenergized commitment to meeting the critical water needs of Native American communities. Just this month President Obama signed landmark legislation on four historic water rights settlements.

These momentous settlements will deliver clean drinking water to the Taos Pueblo and Aamodt case pueblos, including the Pojoaque, Tesuque, San Ildefonso, and Nambe pueblos in New Mexico; the Crow Tribe of Montana, and the White Mountain Apache Tribe of Arizona.

These settlements will provide more than $1 billion to some of the most poverty-stricken regions in the nation. For these communities, the permanent water supply will vastly improve their quality of life and will offer greater economic security both now and in the future.

The settlements offer a fair resolution to more than 100 years of costly, contentious litigation and end decades of water controversy among neighboring communities.

Administration support for four water rights settlements in a single Congress has never happened before.

Additionally, thanks to the Recovery Act, nearly $3 billion is strengthening tribal communities and putting men and women to work improving tribal roads, schools, and water infrastructure projects.

In addition, we've signed nearly 400 contracts to build new roads on tribal lands. That's an estimated $310 million going into tribal businesses, creating jobs.

These investments will have a lasting legacy. But just as important is the fact that more than 90 percent of the funding is going directly to tribal governments or Buy Indian and commercial contractors who, in turn, hire local workers.

But the Recovery Act is only a piece of the progress we are making on the economy.

We are also working to engage tribal governments in our national energy priorities, including renewable energy development on tribal lands. We know that Tribal lands hold a great capacity for solar, wind and geothermal projects, and we are committed to helping you unlock that potential.

My good friend Energy Secretary Steven Chu is announcing today the establishment of an Office of Indian Energy Policy and Programs at DOE.

The new office, which will be led by a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota, will leverage the Department's resources to promote tribal energy development.

Fourth, President Obama is working to foster healthy Indian communities through investments in our youth. Through the Recovery Act, $277 million is being invested in schools to benefit more than 18,000 Indian students.

Nearly a hundred school improvement projects are under way, half of which have already been completed.

And Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, along with Bureau of Indian Education Director Keith Moore and national experts, are heavily engaged in developing a national education reform agenda that will better serve Indian children.

This includes taking steps to bring Native languages and cultures back into the Indian education framework.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is partnering with Native American youth to create good employment opportunities and build a conservation corps for the 21st century. In 2009, BIA hired 144 youth and – just one year later, through strong outreach and engagement – BIA hired over 1,000 Native American youth that will no doubt be our leaders of tomorrow.

Finally, I will say that critical to all of the initiatives that I have just outlined, is meaningful, structured tribal consultation. Responding to the charge the President gave to us last year, every Cabinet Secretary in this room is working to develop a transparent, comprehensive consultation policy to guide his or her Department's nation to nation interaction with tribes.

These accomplishments are significant. As one tribal chair and president told me yesterday, President Obama's administration has done more on tribal issues in less than 2 years than has been accomplished in the last 20 years.

But there is much more work to be done before Native Americans are full and equal partners in our federal family.

And that is why the President has brought us together today for what is the second ever White House Tribal Nations Conference.

We are here today to build on President Barack Obama's commitment to strengthen the nation to nation relationship with Indian Country.

We are here today to pledge anew our respect for the inherent sovereignty of Indian nations.

And we are here today to honor our commitments to American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

The President has directed me, along with the other cabinet secretaries, to work with tribal leaders to develop a comprehensive agenda to reform, restructure and rebuild federal relations with Indian Country.

We are here to do that with you today.

In a few minutes, we will hear remarks from the President.

We will then convene into breakout sessions at which you will be able to have an extensive government to government conversation with me and my Cabinet colleagues.

As I said at the beginning, there is no doubt that much work remains to be done – by all of us.

All phases of our relationship and all major aspects of Indian Country's social, economic and political development are on today's agenda and open for discussion.
