Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today praised President Obama's signing of five major settlements for Indian Country, calling the agreements a milestone in empowerment and reconciliation for the Nation's First Americans.

The Claims Resolution Act of 2010 signed into law today includes the $3.4 billion Cobell settlement regarding the U.S. government's trust management and accounting of Native American trust accounts and resources; and four water rights agreements, totaling more than $1 billion, that will deliver clean drinking water to tribes in New Mexico, Arizona and Montana and end decades of water allocation controversy among neighboring communities.

"Today the President has taken another giant step toward fulfilling this Administration's pledge to meet our trust responsibilities, empower tribal governments and help build safer, stronger and more prosperous tribal communities," Secretary Salazar said. "These historic settlements mark a new chapter in our work to strengthen the nation to nation relationship with Indian Country."

"This Administration's support for four water rights settlements in a single Congress is unprecedented," said Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk. "The agreements reflect the commitment of a wide range of stakeholders, including states, tribes and local communities, to work together constructively with the Administration rather than stay locked in an endless cycle of litigation. Step by step we are making steady progress in empowering Indian Country."

The Cobell agreement resolves the 14-year, highly contentious class action lawsuit regarding the U.S. government's trust management and accounting of individual Native American trust accounts and resources. The settlement honorably and responsibly addresses long-standing injustices and demonstrates President Obama's commitment to reconciliation and empowerment for Indian nations.

Under the settlement, $1.5 billion will be distributed to class members in compensation for their historical accounting claims and to resolve potential claims that the United States mismanaged the administration of trust assets. The agreement also establishes a $1.9 billion fund for the voluntary buy-back and consolidation of fractionated land interests to address the continued proliferation of thousands of new trust accounts caused by the division of land interests through succeeding generations.

The land consolidation program will provide individual Indians with an opportunity to consolidate and transfer divided ownership interests to their tribal governments, where they will remain in trust for the benefit of tribal communities. Individual Indians will receive cash payments for these transfers and, as an additional incentive, transfers will trigger government payments into a $60 million dollar Indian scholarship fund.

The Cobell settlement is the beginning of true trust reform, noted Salazar, who is establishing a Secretarial Commission on Indian Trust Administration and Reform in consultation with tribes. This Commission will undertake a forward-looking, comprehensive evaluation of how the Interior Department manages and administers its trust responsibilities. "We need to be more transparent and

customer-friendly," the Secretary said. "The status quo is not acceptable."

The four Indian water rights settlements contained in the legislation will provide permanent water supplies and offer economic security for the Taos Pueblo and Aamodt case pueblos, including the Pojoaque, Tesuque, San Ildefonso, and Nambe pueblos in New Mexico; as well as the Crow Tribe of Montana and the White Mountain Apache Tribe in Arizona. The agreements will build and improve reservation water systems, rehabilitate irrigation projects, construct a regional multi-pueblo water system, and codify water-sharing arrangements between Indian and neighboring communities.

Additional Information is available at www.cobellsettlement.com. The Department of the Interior website: www.doi.gov. And the Office of the Special Trustee website: www.doi.gov/ost.
