Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Assistant Secretary Larry Echo Hawk expressed their deepest condolences to the family and friends of Wilma Mankiller, the former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, who passed away today, praising her as a dynamic and visionary leader dedicated to the wellbeing and betterment of her tribal community.

“On behalf of all Interior employees, and especially those in Indian Affairs who knew and worked with Wilma, I want to extend our heartfelt sympathy and prayers to her family for their comfort and peace,” Secretary Salazar said. “Throughout her long career of advocating the best for her people, and all of Indian Country, Wilma was a shining example of courage and leadership for all Americans. We will miss her dearly, but we know that her spirit and example live on, encouraging all American Indians to stand up for what they believe in and to step up and accept the challenge of serving in leadership roles.”

“The news of Wilma’s passing has deeply touched all of us here at Interior and throughout Indian Country who knew her as a leader, friend or colleague,” said Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk. “She willingly reached out beyond her tribal community and Indian Country in search of solutions to the social and economic challenges facing the Cherokee people, while sharing her knowledge and insights with anyone who needed them. We honor her with our gratitude for all she has contributed in service to her people and to Indian Country.”

“Her personal experiences in childhood of the economic struggles of her family and the impact of the federal government’s relocation policy on her life led to insights into what should be done, and could be done, to improve the lives of all Indian people,” Echo Hawk said. “On behalf of all Indian Affairs employees, I want to extend our deepest sympathies and condolences.”

The first woman Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation (1985 to 1995), Mankiller was a nationally recognized American Indian leader, known for her activism, pragmatism and steadfastness in addressing social and economic challenges facing the Cherokee community. Under her leadership, tribal enrollment tripled, employment doubled and new health centers and children's programs blossomed. She took Indian issues to the White House and met with three presidents: Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton.

A memorial service has been scheduled for Saturday at 11 a.m. at the Cherokee Nation Cultural Grounds in Tahlequah, not far from where she was born.