Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today announced that he has named businesswoman and attorney Karen J. Atkinson, an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes in North Dakota, as director of the Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development.

As the IEED director, Atkinson will oversee an agency that provides services to federally recognized tribes in the areas of economic development, employment and training, and energy and mineral development, and administers the Indian Guaranteed Loan Program. Her appointment will become effective on November 14, 2011.

“Karen understands very well that to improve economic conditions in Indian Country, we must help tribal leaders with business development and job creation in their communities,” Echo Hawk said. “I am pleased that Karen has agreed to use her extensive knowledge and experience of business and government to lead the Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development in its mission to empower tribes and build their economies.”

“I am honored that Assistant Secretary Echo Hawk has given me this opportunity to work with him and Secretary Salazar in supporting tribes and their efforts for economic self-determination,” Atkinson said. “I look forward to working with the Assistant Secretary’s team and with tribal leaders on addressing the challenges to improving economic and employment conditions in Indian Country.”

Atkinson returns to the Interior with 23 years of experience working in the public, private and non-profit sectors, including four years with the Department. Immediately prior to her appointment, Atkinson was the president of Tribal Strategies, Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm she established that advises tribes, Native American entrepreneurs and private industry on energy, economic development and small business issues to enhance economic opportunities in tribal communities.

Atkinson also served as the first executive director of the Native American Contractors Association (NACA), a trade association that promotes the interests of Native American small businesses who provide professional services to the federal government.

After leaving the Interior Department in 2001, Atkinson served on the staff of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs as senior counselor to Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, where she worked with tribal leaders and helped to draft the Indian Tribal Energy Development and Self Determination Act of 2005. That legislation promotes tribal energy sufficiency and economic development.

Atkinson began her previous tenure with the Department as a senior counselor to the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife and Parks from July 1997 until she was promoted to deputy director of the National Park Service in July 2000. In these positions, she focused on building partnerships between the NPS and tribes, and helped develop a Service-wide environmental leadership program focusing on sustainable development and energy efficiency.

Prior to her time at Interior, Atkinson had her own law practice in Albuquerque, N.M., and she served as a negotiator and drafter of a secretarial order on American Indian tribal rights and the Endangered Species Act issued by Interior and the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1997. Atkinson also worked as an attorney for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Montana, where she worked extensively on treaty rights and cultural resource protection issues. Upon graduation from law school, Atkinson served as senior judicial law clerk to then-U.S. District Judge Juan Burciaga in Albuquerque.

Atkinson is the recipient of the National Park Service Achievement Award in 2000 for her work on the Grand Canyon Over Flights Team, and has served as an advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. She was also program director for Duke University's Executive Education Tribal Consultation Course, and since 2001 has provided training on tribal economic development and small business issues. In addition, she has authored several publications on tribal business, energy development and land use.

Atkinson earned her undergraduate degree from Stanford University and her law degree in 1987 from the University of New Mexico School of Law, where she was a member of the Natural Resource Journal law review, graduating with honors.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs oversees the Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development, whose mission is to foster stronger American Indian and Alaska Native communities by helping federally recognized tribes with employment and workforce training programs; helping tribes develop their renewable and non-renewable energy and mineral resources; and increasing access to capital for tribal and individual American Indian- and Alaska Native-owned businesses. For more information about IEED programs and services, visit http://www.indianaffairs.gov/WhoWeAre/AS-IA/IEED/index.htm.

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