Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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BILLINGS AND CROW AGENCY, MT--At two events with tribal leaders in Montana today, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and other top Interior officials took what he called “the latest steps to implement President Obama’s pledge for reconciliation and empowerment for American Indian nations.”

In Billings this morning, Secretary Salazar and Deputy Secretary David J. Hayes hosted nation-to-nation consultations with tribal leaders from the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains region to discuss the land consolidation component of the $3.4 billion Cobell Settlement. Sen. Jon Tester also participated.

Later in the day, Secretary Salazar and Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Mike Connor visited the Crow Indian Reservation to participate with a crowd of 200 celebrating the recently approved Crow Tribe Water Rights Settlement. The water settlement will bring more than $460 million to the Crow Nation to ensure safe drinking water for the reservation and rehabilitate the irrigation project.

“Today’s events in Montana signal a new era in the U.S. government’s relationship with Indian Country nationwide,” Secretary Salazar said. “The Billings meeting and upcoming meetings with tribal leaders in other regions are just part of the Obama Administration’s commitment to re-invigorating nation-to-nation relationships with tribes. And this afternoon’s celebration in Crow Agency made me especially proud of our Administration’s support for water rights settlements that will deliver much-needed water to Indian communities such as the Crow Reservation.”

The land consolidation meeting in Billings today was the first in a series of six regional meetings. Additional tribal consultations will be scheduled through Oct. 15, 2011 in Seattle, Phoenix, Minneapolis, Albuquerque, and Oklahoma City. Today’s participants included leaders and representatives of a number of tribes. Joining Secretary Salazar and Deputy Secretary Hayes from the Interior Department were Associate Deputy Secretary Meghan Conklin, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Jodi Gillette and Bureau of Indian Affairs Director Mike Black.

At Crow Agency, Secretary Salazar and Commissioner Connor outlined how the water settlement will create jobs on the reservation while improving the Crow Irrigation Project; developing a municipal, rural and industrial water system; and supporting development of Crow Nation energy resources. Of the $460 million, Salazar announced that, at the request of Crow Chairman Cedric Black Eagle, the first $500,000 of the settlement funds appropriated by Congress was released to the tribe on July 8 and that $4.9 million in early funding for the settlement has been made available for future disbursement to the tribe.

The Secretary thanked Crow Chairman Black Eagle, Vice-Chairman Coolidge Jefferson, and Secretary Scott Russell and Interior’s Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Del Laverdure, also a member of the Crow Nation, for welcoming Interior officials to their homeland. He thanked Letty Belin, Counselor to the Deputy Secretary, and Pamela Williams, Director of the Secretary’s Indian Water Rights Office, for their leadership in the Department of the Interior in reaching the settlement.

**BACKGROUND ON COBELL SETTLEMENT:**

The $3.4 billion Cobell settlement was approved by Congress on November 30, 2010 (Claims Resolution Act of 2010) and signed by President Obama on December 8, 2010. The Cobell Settlement will address the Federal Government's responsibility for an historical accounting of Individual Indian trust accounts and trust mismanagement claims on behalf of more than 300,000 individual Indians. A fund of $1.5 billion will be used to compensate class members for their historical accounting, trust administration and asset mismanagement claims.

In addition, to address the continued proliferation of thousands of new trust accounts caused by the "fractionation" of land interests through succeeding generations, the Settlement establishes a $1.9 billion fund for the voluntary buy-back and consolidation of fractionated land interests. The land consolidation program will provide individual American Indians with an opportunity to obtain cash payments for divided land interests and free up the land for the benefit of tribal communities. Up to $60 million of the $1.9 billion will be set aside to provide scholarships for post secondary higher education and vocational training for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

On May 27, 2011, U.S. Senior District Judge Thomas F. Hogan granted communication between representatives of the United States and Cobell class members only in regards to the Trust Land Consolidation component of the Settlement. This enabled the Department of the Interior to set up regional tribal consultations, the first of which was on July 15 in Billings, Montana. Additional tribal consultations will be held through Oct. 15, 2011 in Seattle, Phoenix, Minneapolis, Albuquerque, and Oklahoma City. More information on the upcoming consultations and other aspects of the Cobell settlement can be found at www.doi.gov/cobell.

**BACKGROUND ON CROW WATER SETTLEMENT:**

The omnibus law that resolved the Cobell litigation also included four major water rights settlements–totaling more than $1 billion—for American Indian tribes including the Crow Nation. The Crow Reservation encompasses more than 2 million acres, and is home to roughly two-thirds of the approximately 12,000 Crow tribal members.

The drinking water system on the Reservation has significant deficiencies in capacity and water quality and many tribal members must at times haul water. The Crow Irrigation Project (CIP), operated and maintained by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is in a state of significant disrepair and cannot support the Reservation's mainstay of farming and ranching. The Bureau of Reclamation will carry out activities to improve the CIP, which consists of nine diversion dams, one storage dam, nine canal systems, and other irrigation structures.

Litigation concerning the Tribe's water rights commenced in 1975 and will be brought to a close under the settlement. In 1985, the Tribe and the State of Montana entered into negotiations on this matter and reached agreement on the Crow-Tribe-Montana Water Rights Compact on June 22, 1999. President Obama signed legislation to approve the Compact in 2010.