Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today joined First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House kitchen garden for the planting of the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—a traditional indigenous agricultural method of planting. This activity comes a week after the launch of Let's Move! in Indian Country (LMIC) and continues to push the message of leading active and healthy lifestyles in Indian Country.

"Today's a big day for us in the garden because it's the first time we're going to use native seeds of corn, beans and squash in the way they've been planted for thousands of years," Mrs. Obama said. "We're all pretty excited to continue this tradition. This is another example of a fun, easy way that we all can work together to be healthier. And that's what we're trying to accomplish with Let's Move!"

"I am always very pleased when history acknowledges the wonderful achievements of our nation's first Americans," Echo Hawk said. "The agricultural contributions of the ancestors to contemporary American Indian and Alaska Natives are significant, and today's event is a great testament to their lasting legacy."

Corn, beans, and squash, when planted together, are referred to as the Three Sisters—stemming from tribal stories that weave the three agricultural staples into traditional narratives. This method is also known as companion planting. The science behind such planting techniques involves the mutually beneficial effects of their simultaneous growth. The corn provides a structure for the beans to climb, eliminating the need for poles. The beans provide the nitrogen to the soil that the other plants utilize and the squash spreads along the ground, blocking the sunlight, which helps prevent weeds. This method of planting and agriculture differs greatly from the more common methods of plowing. The First Lady's Three Sisters planting today acknowledges the amazing contributions and skills of our nation's first Americans.

The numerous contributions of the ancestors to today's American Indian and Alaska Native people are continually being recognized by modern science. Europeans, whose farming relied on extensive plowing, often dismissed the Three Sisters mound system as primitive. Early settlers had a strong ideological interest in denying that the Natives here had any agriculture. There were apologists from noted and influential people, like the political theorist John Locke, who justified European right to take Native lands because it was not being utilized. Modern science has come to realize the method behind planting these three staples together is based upon sound scientific evidence and principles.

Mrs. Obama was joined by numerous American Indian children from a variety of tribes including Jemez Pueblo, Skokomish, Cherokee, Sault Ste. Marie, Navajo, Turtle Mountain Chippewa, St. Regis Mohawk, Tlingit, Oglala Sioux, Standing Rock Sioux, and the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation. Together, they planted Cherokee White Eagle corn, Rattlesnake pole beans, and Seminole squash seeds that were provided by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian.

"We harvested some crops for the First Lady and planted some squash, beans, and corn," said Jayce

Archambault of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. “It was a real fun experience; to get outside and be active and plant these things to help people get healthy is something we will remember.”

The planting of the Three Sisters is intertwined with the LMIC initiative to end childhood obesity in Indian Country. In 2009, American Indian and Alaska Native children aged two to four had a higher prevalence of obesity (20.7%) than any other racial or ethnic group. In Indian Country, one in three children are overweight or obese before their fifth birthday and a national survey found that 18.9 percent of high school aged students are obese. LMIC brings together federal agencies, communities, non-profits, corporate partners, schools and tribes to focus on four areas: (1) early childhood development, (2) healthy learning communities, (3) physical activity, and (4) increasing access to affordable, healthy foods. For more information on this initiative, please visit: www.letsmove.gov/indiancountry.

Assistant Secretary Echo Hawk was also joined by other leaders in the American Indian and Alaska Native community, including Indian Health Service Director Dr. Yvette Roubideaux, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service Director Kevin Concannon, Bureau of Indian Education Director Keith Moore, President of the National Congress of American Indian Jefferson Keel, National Museum of the American Indian Director Kevin Gover, NFL quarterback Sam Bradford and basketball player Tahnee Robinson.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs has responsibility for helping the Secretary of the Interior to fulfill his trust responsibilities to tribal and individual trust beneficiaries and promoting self-determination and self-governance for the nation’s 565 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes. The Assistant Secretary oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which supports tribal agriculture, and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which administers one of two federal school systems and funding to tribal colleges and universities.

Note to Editors: A photo of the event may be viewed via the Indian Affairs website at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/62695826@N03
