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Washington, D.C.—Today is Native American Heritage Day, thanks to legislation signed by President Obama that permanently designates the Friday after Thanksgiving Day each year as a day of honoring American Indian and Alaska Native cultural heritage and tribal sovereignty.

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk thanked President Obama and the Congress for the designation.

“It is fitting that Native American Heritage Day follows Thanksgiving because the holiday is rooted in the tradition of the first meal between European settlers and the Native Americans who taught them how to survive in their new home,’” Secretary Salazar said.

“Native Americans have much to appreciate this year,” said Assistant Secretary Echo Hawk, noting that in addition to signing House Joint Resolution 40, the “Native American Heritage Day Act of 2009,” the President recently issued an Executive Memorandum to the heads of executive departments and agencies that strengthens federal-tribal relationships. He signed the memo at the White House Tribal Nations Conference held at the Department of the Interior on November 5.

Native American Heritage Day can be observed through appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities. It is an opportunity for all Americans to learn about the historical status of Native American tribal governments; the present day conditions of Native American people; their traditions and languages; and their rich cultural legacy.