Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WINDOW ROCK, Arizona -- Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar told Navajo Nation officials today that President Obama's major goals for working with Indian Country include improving educational opportunities for American Indian children, strengthening law enforcement and advancing self-sustaining economic development for tribal communities.

The Secretary, who conferred with Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley and other Nation officials, was accompanied by two of Interior's highest ranking policymakers -- Solicitor Hilary Tompkins, an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation and Stanford University-trained attorney and law professor who was chief counsel to New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson; and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk, a law professor and former Idaho Attorney General and state legislator, who grew up near the Navajo Reservation.

"As we engage with Navajo leaders on these priorities, I will rely heavily on the wise council of Hilary and Larry and the advice of President Shirley and other Nation officials to build better schools and educational programs, make the Navajo Reservation a safer place for this and future generations and expand the economic base of Navajo communities," Salazar said. "We will encourage dialogue with tribal officials and work in partnership to develop solutions to the critical challenges facing Indian Country."

Nearly half of the Department's Bureau of Indian Education schools are on the Navajo Reservation, which has more than 255,000 enrolled members. The median age of the nation's population is 22.5 years. President Obama's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is providing $55 million for the Rough Rock Replacement School Project. Earlier this year President Obama signed a law authorizing the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project, which will provide clean, safe and reliable water to a quarter of a million people in the eastern portion of the Navajo Reservation, the City of Gallup and the Jicarilla Apache Nation. About 70,000 Navajo people are without access to running water and residents in parts of the Navajo Nation have had to haul water for generations.

The Secretary's visit was highlighted by the return of Interior Solicitor Tompkins, who received a warm welcome from Navajo Nation officials. "Because of her valuable experience and extensive legal expertise, Hilary is a major asset to Interior," Salazar said. "For the first time in the 160-year history of the Department, the Interior Solicitor is a Native American."

"The Navajo people could not be more proud of one of our daughters," said Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley. "Hilary has worked, studied, struggled, and now is in one of the highest offices in the land. She came back to help her people with the Navajo Nation Department of Justice, went on to work for New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, and now she's been called to serve the nation and all Native Americans by the President of the United States."