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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today pledged to restore integrity in government relations with Indian tribes, fulfill the United States' trust responsibilities to Native Americans, and work cooperatively to build stronger economies and safer American Indian communities.

"As Secretary of the Interior, I will work hard to empower America's Native American communities by helping address economic development, education, and law enforcement and other major challenges faced in Indian country," Secretary Salazar told members of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in his first formal testimony to Congress. "I will also seek to resolve the unending litigation about the management of these lands and assets. And I am committed to the settlement of Indian water rights claims."

Salazar reiterated President Obama's pledge to empower Indian people in the development of the national agenda. "As President, he recognizes that federally recognized Indian tribes are sovereign, self-governing political entities that enjoy a government-to-government relationship with the United States government. I, too, am a strong supporter of the principle of tribal self-determination and will work to fully enable tribal self-governance."

Salazar said his administration would address Indian Country infrastructure and employment needs through its Interior programs and the congressional reinvestment and recovery package to encourage robust sustainable economic development that will create thousands of jobs.

One of the greatest opportunities for economic development for tribes can be the development of alternative energy sources, Salazar said. Indian lands have major resources for renewable energy as well as rich sources of conventional fossil fuels.

"Indian country offers some of the premier wind energy sites in the United States," the Secretary noted. "I look forward to exploring with tribes the potential for wind, geothermal, biomass and solar energy development that exists on those lands."

The Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development has identified 77 reservations that possess commercial-scale wind resources and the ability to support viable wind-based economies. Forty of these are in states that enacted a Renewable Portfolio Standard requiring utilities to purchase a percentage of their power from renewable sources.

On education, Salazar said Interior will look at ways to preserve native languages through the Indian education system and examine the No Child Left Behind Act, its implementation and the issues it has raised in Indian schools. "I agree with President Obama and Vice President Biden that our children and our country need a vision for a 21st century education in Indian schools," Salazar said. "This begins by demanding more reform and accountability and asking parents to take responsibility for their children's success."

The Secretary also pledged to recruit, retain, and reward teachers who teach in Bureau of Indian Education schools. Interior is responsible for 183 elementary and secondary schools and dormitories as well as two Bureau-operated post-secondary institutions. This school system serves about 47,000 students on or near 63 reservations in 23 states.

Citing his experience as Colorado's Attorney General, Salazar said he would use his law enforcement background to strengthen the kinds of partnerships that will help bring about safer Indian communities. "Violent crime in Indian country must be aggressively confronted and we will continue to work with Tribes and the Department of Justice in this regard," Salazar said. "We will continue to aggressively attack methamphetamine trafficking and abuse in Indian communities."

"I also plan to address the serious declining conditions of detention facilities in Indian country as well as staffing needs for those facilities," the secretary said. "And finally, I want to work on strengthening tribal court systems."

The United States, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services, and tribal programs, provides public safety and judicial services to Indian tribes and their communities. The Department provides either directly or through Indian Self-Determination and Self-Governance contracts and compacts basic law enforcement services; local court services; detention and corrections programs; and professional training related to policing, detention and judicial services.

The full text of the Secretary's testimony is online at http://www.doi.gov.

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