Assistant Secretary Committed to Supporting Tribal Recovery Efforts

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Carl J. Artman met Tuesday with officials from several Southern California tribes impacted by the Poomacha, Witch and Harris fires that have raged across thousands of acres of their reservations over the past week. The tribal leaders were attending a multi-agency coordination meeting of federal and state agencies organized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the Rincon Indian Reservation, one of the most severely impacted communities. Artman visited some of the burned areas on the Rincon reservation.

“I want to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to the federal, state, county and tribal agencies and non-governmental organizations that have joined our efforts to assist these tribes in their hour of need,” Artman said. “I also want to assure the tribal leaders whose reservations have been impacted by the fire emergency that the BIA and its partners will continue to assist with their recovery efforts.”

The BIA’s partners in the fire emergency relief effort include the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Indian Health Service (IHS), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the American Red Cross, the State of California Office of Emergency Services (OES) and the San Diego County Sheriff’s Office. The BIA also has been working with San Diego Gas & Electric in support of their efforts to replace on-reservation power poles and lines destroyed by the fires.

Seventy-two employees from the BIA’s Southern California Agency in Riverside and Pacific Regional Office in Sacramento, including social workers and those specializing in tribal operations, natural resources and realty, have been working closely with other federal, state and tribal agencies to assist displaced individuals and families with applying for relief assistance.

Since October 29, the BIA has received over 800 applications for assistance from single family Indian households and individuals, many of whom are on moderate-to-low and fixed incomes, for basic living needs such as food, clothing and temporary shelter. Approximately $600,000 in emergency assistance funds have been made available for disbursement to eligible recipients.

In addition, over 200 BIA firefighters were dispatched to battle the Poomacha fire alone, which, at only 70 percent contained, remains a serious threat to the La Jolla Reservation (the Witch and Harris fires are 99 percent and 100 percent contained, respectively).

“I want to commend the employees of the BIA’s Southern California Agency and Pacific Regional Office and other BIA regions who responded so quickly and effectively to this emergency,” Artman said. “Their diligence in the performance of their duties during so difficult a time best exemplifies the BIA’s mission

of service to the tribes."

In addition to BIA personnel, fire crews and trucks were sent from tribes both in and out of the state. The Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation in California and the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation in Oregon each sent a hotshot fire crew. Fire trucks sent from the Warm Springs Tribes, the Chippewa-Cree Tribe in Montana and the Colorado River Indian Tribes in Arizona joined equipment provided by 11 of Southern California's 18 tribes.

The La Jolla Band of Luiseno Mission Indians and the Rincon Band of Luiseno Mission Indians have suffered the most severe damage from the Poomacha fire. The La Jolla reservation has lost 59 of its residential homes while the Rincon reservation has lost 65 homes and its historic chapel. In and around the Rincon reservation alone, both Indian and non-Indian residents have been coping with lost homes, clogged or closed roads, power outages, lack of potable water, downed telephone lines, as well as health concerns from dead or dying animals and the fires' impact on air and water quality.

Other tribes that have experienced fire damage and the displacement of tribal members include the Pauma-Yuima Band of Luiseno Mission Indians, the Mesa Grande Band of Diegueno Mission Indians, the Santa Ysabel Band of Diegueno Mission Indians and the San Pasqual Band of Diegueno Mission Indians.

The Poomacha fire has burned approximately 19,748 acres on the La Jolla (8,679 acres), Pauma-Yuima (5,360 acres), Rincon (3,585 acres), Pala (2,118 acres) and San Pasqual (6 acres) reservations. The Witch fire has burned approximately 10,481 acres on the Barona, Capitan Grande, Inaja-Cosmit, Mesa Grande and Santa Ysabel reservations. The Harris fire burned one acre on the Jamul Reservation.

In the face of catastrophe, Indian communities in Southern California came together to support the many fire victims. Local casino hotels became evacuation centers for those seeking shelter. Tribal evacuation centers were established on the Pechanga, Soboba and Campo reservations. The Noli School, a BIA funded 6-12 grant day school on the Soboba reservation, became a temporary shelter. And some tribes and tribal members not dependent upon federal relief chose to forgo their BIA assistance so that others in greater need could receive it