Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Director W. Patrick Ragsdale toured the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Reservation yesterday to view the damage wrought by Hurricane Katrina and to meet with Choctaw Chief Phillip Martin and tribal officials on the Bureau's continuing relief efforts in the area. He was accompanied by Franklin Keel, Regional Director of the BIA's Eastern Regional Office in Nashville, Tenn., and Special Agent David Nicholas, Commander of the BIA's Office of Law Enforcement Services (OLES) District VI, which includes the Mississippi Choctaw Tribe, who have been coordinating the Bureau's response to the federally recognized tribes impacted by the powerful storm.

"The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Choctaw Tribe and surrounding communities has been tremendous," Ragsdale said. "We are working with Chief Martin and the Mississippi Choctaw tribal government to assist their recovery from this natural disaster."

The hurricane's eye passed directly over the city of Philadelphia, Miss., where the BIA's Choctaw Agency is located. Winds estimated at 100 to 120 miles per hour knocked out power to homes and businesses, felled trees, and damaged roofs in each of the tribe's eight communities. The hardest hit appeared to be Bogue Homa, the southernmost Choctaw community where several homes were left with structural damage and 200 families needing assistance. At least 300 acres of the tribe's forest lands suffered damage when the high winds uprooted hardwood and pine trees, some as large as 24 inches in diameter.

The OLES deployed police officers to the Choctaw Reservation where they arrived shortly after midnight on August 29 with a Mobile Command Vehicle (MCV) to assist the Mississippi Choctaw Tribal Police Department and to support local relief efforts. The OLES also has coordinated law enforcement personnel sent by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the Miccosukee Tribe of Florida, the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation of Arizona, and the Tohono O'odham Nation of Arizona to assist the Mississippi Choctaw Tribe. Almost 80 BIA and tribal officers have participated in the ongoing relief effort.

In addition to working with tribal officials, BIA personnel have been working with Federal and State emergency management agencies to provide assistance to non-Indian communities in the region.

While the Mississippi Choctaw Tribe administers the BIA's General Assistance Program for tribal members living on the reservation, the Bureau is working with the tribe to determine how much additional funding it may need to continue providing such assistance.

This is the seventh hurricane mobilization undertaken by the BIA's Eastern Regional Office, which serves the federally recognized tribes in the Gulf Coast states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi, as well as in the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island and North and South Carolina. While keeping an eye on the hurricane's progress, the regional office maintained communication with Mississippi Choctaw tribal officials. Once the tribe made its request for assistance, the BIA dispatched its MCV from Florida to Choctaw, Miss., where the tribe is headquartered, to become its Mobile Command Center. "BIA personnel were already underway when

Katrina made landfall in Mississippi," said Keel.

Shortly after arriving on August 29 law enforcement personnel began going house-to-house to check on residents and provide aid. The BIA also has been working with businesses who are contributing to the relief effort, such as Tractor Supply Company of Nashville which donated much-needed dog food and cattle feed to the affected areas.

"I am extremely proud of how quickly BIA employees and tribal leaders moved to aid the victims of Hurricane Katrina," Ragsdale said. "The morale of our personnel on the ground is very high."

The BIA will continue to provide relief assistance until the tribe is able to move into its recovery phase when power is fully restored to its communities, road conditions improve, and damage assessments and home repairs can be made. The tribe's eight BIA-funded schools suffered minimal effects from the storm. The Bureau's Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP), which oversees the BIA school system, will replace spoiled food supplies. The schools are expected to reopen within the next few days.