Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON - The House and Senate appropriations committees with funding authority over Department of the Interior (DOl) programs have approved a DOl plan to realign the management organization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST). Input for the reorganization plan was received through the Joint Tribal/DOl Task Force on Trust Reform and a series of consultation meetings the Interior Department held over the past year with tribal leaders. The Department released details of the reorganization plan on December 4.

"I am very encouraged by this strong endorsement from Congress, allowing us to take an historic step in the reform of Indian trust management and improving the delivery of services to the American Indian and Alaska Native community," Interior Secretary Gale Norton said today. "I am particularly encouraged by the bipartisan recognition from both the House and the Senate of the hard work we've undertaken and our strong reliance on the advice that was given to us by tribal leaders over the past year."

Outgoing Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs Neal McCaleb says the fundamental themes of the reorganization plan were developed over the past year through the extensive work of the Tribal Leaders/DOl Task Force:

"This approval by the Congress is a testament to the sheer volume of work we have undertaken over this past year and our intensive efforts to include tribal leaders in the development of our reorganization plan. Secretary Norton and I are also deeply grateful for the support and guidance we've received from the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and its chairman, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and vice-chairman, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (D-CO)."

In its December 18 letter to Interior Secretary Norton concurring with the DOl reorganization plan, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies called attention to "the Department's efforts over the past year in formulating this proposal, including more than forty-five meetings with Tribal leaders, extensive internal management reviews, and six appearances before the relevant authorizing committees of Congress." The committee's chairman, Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) and the panel's ranking member, Sen. Conrad Bums (D-MT), issued the letter.

The House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies also released a letter to Secretary Norton late yesterday approving the reorganization plan. House subcommittee chairman Rep. Joe Skeen (R-NM) and ranking minority member Rep. Norman Dicks (D-W A) noted the "comprehensive process of informing the Indian community through exhaustive consultations" conducted over the past year by Secretary Norton and Assistant Secretary McCaleb.