Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Interior Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs Neal A. McCaleb today announced his strategic plan for bringing transparency, responsiveness and resources to the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Federal acknowledgment process under 25 CFR Part 83. The Department sent the plan to the House Committee on Government Reform, the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, both House and Senate Appropriations Committees, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Comptroller General of the United States in response to a report issued by the General Accounting Office (GAO) in November 2001 entitled "Improvements Needed in Tribal Recognition Process."

In agreeing with the GAO's recommendations to make the Department's regulatory process more predictable and timely, McCaleb said "We developed a strategic plan to make acknowledgment precedents more accessible and to provide clearer guidelines to the regulations in order to ensure consistency and to improve public understanding of acknowledgment decisions."

The plan proposes to bring greater transparency to the Federal acknowledgement process by making information more accessible to petitioners, interested parties and the public utilizing various methods. This includes using CD-ROMs and the Internet so that decisions, guidelines and precedents manuals are readily accessed.

As part of the plan to make the process more timely, the BIA developed a needs assessment of the Branch of Acknowledgment and Research's (BAR) workload and resources, and identified certain refinements to the process. The plan's recommendations include increasing the number of BAR's professional, administrative and support staff, using contractors to perform data entry as well as assisting in responding to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and preparing litigation records, and providing additional records management and office equipment.

The BIA also is recommending the review of possible procedural changes to the process to improve response times for petitioners and document requestors such as amending deadlines and time lines, standardizing and streamlining document handling, reviewing evaluation criteria and examining other areas of the process where changes can be made.

The Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs has responsibility for fulfilling the Department's trust responsibilities and promoting self-determination on behalf of tribal governments, American Indians and Alaska Natives. The Assistant Secretary oversees the BIA and the Federal acknowledgment process and is also responsible for providing services to approximately 1.4 million American Indians and Alaska Natives from the 562 federally recognized tribes.

The strategic plan may be viewed via the Department's website at www.doi.gov.