Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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(WASHINGTON, D.C.) – The Joint Tribal Leaders/DOI Task Force on Trust Reform will hold its next meeting on June 13-15, 2002 in Bismarck, N.D. The Task Force was established in February of 2002 to review and propose plans for improving the Department's management of individual Indian and tribal trust assets.

On June 5, 2002, task force members presented a progress report to Secretary Gale Norton on their efforts to review and evaluate proposals for improving the Department's management of Indian trust funds and assets. The report identifies five options for trust management improvement by the Department along with comments and recommendations on each; proposes specific "cross cutting" principles that the five options should address; explores changes needed at low, mid- and upper management levels within the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Interior Department; and recommends "key" criteria with which to evaluate the options. The report has been sent to tribal leaders throughout Indian Country for review and comment as part of the Department's on-going tribal consultation process on trust reform.

Last November, Secretary Norton announced her proposal to transfer and consolidate Indian trust asset management functions currently administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and other Interior agencies within a new Bureau of Indian Trust Assets Management (BITAM). She also announced the establishment of an Assistant Secretary for Indian Trust Assets Management to oversee BITAM and a new Office of Indian Trust Transition (OITT) to implement her transfer and consolidation plan. After consulting with tribal leaders, Secretary Norton supported their request to establish a task force to review her proposal and alternative plans submitted by tribes themselves.

The Joint Tribal Leaders/DOI Task Force is composed of Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Neal A. McCaleb, Deputy Secretary J. Steven Griles, Associate Deputy Secretary James E. Cason, Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs Director David L. Bernhardt, Office of Communications Director Eric Ruff, the Special Trustee for American Indians Thomas J. Slonaker, Indian Trust Transition Director Ross O. Swimmer and Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Aurene Martin along with 24 tribal leaders and 16 alternates from the BIA's twelve regions. Co-chairing the task force are Griles, McCaleb, Tex Hall, Chairman of the Three Affiliated Tribes of North Dakota and Sue Masten, Chairwoman of the Yurok Tribe of Indians of California.

The task force held its first meeting in Shepherdstown, W.Va., on February 1-4, 2002. Subsequent meetings have taken place in Phoenix, Ariz., in March; San Diego, Calif., in April and Minneapolis, Minn., in May. Additional meetings will be held over the next six months to allow the task force to continue its work.

**Note to Editors**: *A 2-page list of task force members accompanies this release.*