Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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(Washington, D.C.) – Bilateral talks between agencies from the United States and Canada that administer programs to help their Indigenous populations yielded a commitment to continue sharing information and working on common issues of concern. A one-day meeting took place on May 2, 2002, in Ottawa, Canada with delegations headed by the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Neal McCaleb and Marc Lafreniere, Deputy Minister of the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

“Both countries, clearly share a strong commitment to enabling economic, educational, and social successes in working with the First Nations in our respective countries and I look forward to working in this cooperative spirit with Canada’s Ministry of Indian and Northern Affairs to advance these objectives,” said Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Neal McCaleb. “I am extremely pleased with the open and frank discussions that we had during the talks.”

The United States and its neighbor to the north have similar histories, yet different styles, in dealing with its Indigenous populations. Each formed relationships based on treaties, physical interaction, and judicial rulings that establish the framework for dealing with their Indigenous inhabitants. Canada has similar government based programs for education, land and resource management, and social programs as the United States, but Canada continues its policy of more direct control over the tribes. Since the early 1960’s particularly with the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act of 1975, the United States embarked on a journey to implement programs that encourage tribes toward self-governance and self-sufficiency. The Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is looking to implement similar polices, but are constrained by laws that prevent them from adequately doing it.

“INAC is hampered by antiquated laws that prevent them from implementing the types of programs that allow the tribes to exert more control over their internal affairs,” said Eric Wilson, Deputy Director, Office of American Indian Trust. OAIT works with its counterpart from the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) to coordinate and facilitate the meetings. “They are looking for success stories to go to the Canadian Legislature to get them to amend the Indian Act, so that Canadian Aboriginals can achieve a level of self-governance and self sufficiency like the tribes are doing in the United States.

The formal discussions established a set of issues that each country has common concerns about, and interest in cooperating with each in order to make their programs more beneficial to tribal people. The meeting focused on five major topics: Economic Development and On-Reserve employment; education; litigation case management; land and resource management, and policing and security issues were on the agenda. Representatives from both agencies shared overviews and answered questions on specific programs, success stories, and policies that have contributed to tribal self-sufficiency.

At the end of the day, the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs McCaleb and Deputy Minister Marc Lafrenier agreed that a series of thematic meetings between program directors should be conducted to work on details that pertain to their programs. Through dialogue, several themes emerged from the talks were: the Office of Indian Education Program’s FACE program; BIA’s Indian Youth Water Resources and Survey Technicians Training Programs, Ground leases/assignments on Tribal land to enable home loan mortgages; Canada’s litigation case management system; and law enforcement issues

that pertain to the Akwesasne reservation that straddles the U.S./Canadian border in New York.

The Office of American Indian Trust will coordinate future meetings as a part of the Office of Indian Affairs' international program. "We want to ensure that quality discussions are taking place that will assist both agencies in achieving their objectives," said Jim Pace, Director, OAIT.

Already, a contingent from the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada will visit with Office of Indian Education Programs personnel in Phoenix, AZ and will tour Gila Crossing Day School and Black Water Day School in Arizona during the week of May 20th. The discussion will focus on the Family and Child Education (FACE) Program initiated in 1990 to develop an integrated model for an American Indian early childhood/parental involvement program that has successfully improved children's ability to learn.

The meeting in Ottawa, Canada was the second meeting between top-level administrators of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The first meeting took place on June 14, 2000 a delegation from Canada led by Shirley Serafini visited the Department of the Interior and met with the former Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs and his staff.