Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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For Immediate Release: February 1, 1999
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Education for American Indian children, safety for Indian reservation residents, the restoration of the environment and a continuation of the remarkable comeback of an American icon lead the way in President Clinton's Fiscal Year 2000 budget request for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The FY 2000 budget request for the BIA is 1.9 billion dollars; an increase of $155.6 million above the 1999 enacted level. "This budget represents the wishes of the Tribal leaders across America for the needs of their people, and is a positive step toward preserving and protecting the needs of the 7th generation of the American Indian people since the reservation system began," stated Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs, Kevin Gover. "These steps are necessary and we are very pleased with this year's budget. This is an important step, but we are still a very long way from bringing the quality of reservation life up to the level most of America now enjoys."

The federal government holds direct responsibility for the education of students in two school systems: the Department of Defense school system for the children of military personnel stationed overseas, and the BIA school system for children on American Indian reservations. Over the years, the schools in Indian country have been neglected. This budget requests major new funding to repair and replace schools in Indian country.

A study by the Inspector General's office determined that Indian schools were in significantly worse shape than even inner city schools. The backlog of repairs necessary to BIA schools is growing and now exceeds $740 million. Although the Bureau of Indian Affairs was recently awarded a "Hammer award for reducing by 50 percent the time it takes to plan, design, and construct new schools on Indian reservations by the National Performance Review, a massive amount of funding will be required to fix the problems that years of neglect created. Throughout Indian country, children are learning in schools that present serious health and safety threats. Many schools have leaking roofs, peeling paint, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate heating and cooling systems or are conducted in trailers too old and unsafe to sustain continued use in a school environment. The Bureau of Indian Affairs funds 185 schools in Indian country, and the most of these schools are more than thirty years old. The design life for a modern school building is twenty-five years. "Indian children are getting a 21st century education in what might as well be 19th century buildings" said Gover, "Our children deserve safe and decent learning environments. This budget is a step toward correcting the terrible situation where our children may be learning on a state of the art computer in a building where the roof is falling in." The school construction and repair request includes $75.9 million to replace Seba Dalkai School on the Navajo reservation in Arizona and Fond Du Lac Ojibway school in Minnesota and complete urgently needed repair work at existing facilities.

The budget also proposes a School Modernization initiative that would provide $400 million in bond issuance authority for tribal governments over two years. Tribal governments could use this authority to issue zero interest bonds to investors who would receive tax credits for the life of the bond in lieu of interest. "In traveling throughout Indian country, the most common request I hear from Tribal leaders is the need for new schools on their reservations. Up until now, it has not been possible to even consider building new schools, because the money has simply not been there in our yearly appropriations. The School Construction initiative will allow Tribes to move quickly to get schools financed and built,

providing a safe, quality learning environment for their children," said Gover.

Inside the schools, the proposed budget for the BIA increases the budget for school operations $27.5 million over 1999 to a total investment of $503.6 million. The United States has a special historic responsibility for the education of Indian children, as was reaffirmed by the President's Executive Order 13096 on American Indian and Alaska Native Education. In this order, the Clinton Administration committed to improving the academic performance and reducing the dropout rate of Indian students. The order set forth six goals, including improved reading and mathematics, increased high school completion, improved science education, and expanded the use of educational technology. The increase in the School Operations budget will cover additional costs for teachers, transportation, and operations due to the growing student population in Indian country.

Fifty-three-thousand students are educated in the BIA school system, in some of the most remote and isolated reservations in the country. Assistant Secretary Gover credited this}ncrease as a wise investment in the future. "This is a great investment in our 7th generation. These students will become the tribal leaders, artists, lawyers, doctors and scribes of the American Indian people. This generation will be the group who will defeat the many problems plaguing Indian country, and their safety and education is the highest priority of this Administration." Part of this increase will also be dedicated to linking every BIA school to the Internet through a partnership with industry giants and the Access Native America program. Internet teaching is especially important in Indian country, because there are very few opportunities for field trips to museums, libraries and other cultural attractions. "The best part of this job is working with our children and seeing the pride on their faces as they show us their schools and their accomplishments," said Gover. "To look into the eyes of these children is to see into the future of the American Indian people. We simply cannot do enough in the areas of education, child protection, and fighting alcohol and drug abuse among our children."

The second major concern addressed by the FY 2000 budget is public safety on the reservations. While violent crime has decreased across most of America, Indian country has experienced a startling rise in violent crime on the reservation. A joint report between the Department of Justice and the Department of Interior showed Indian country law enforcement receives about one fourth the resources of most rural law enforcement agencies. This lack of resources has translated into a lack of police patrols, inferior radio systems, lack of jail space, and even the absence of 911 service on many reservations. While most Americans expect a response time in minutes when calling for help from the police, on many reservations, the response time is measured in hours and in some cases even days. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kevin Gover says this is simply unacceptable. "No community can prosper unless its people feel safe in their homes. For far too long, Indian people have not been afforded the same protection for their homes and their families as other Americans." In last year's budget, Congress provided $20.0 million for BIA to begin addressing the law enforcement needs of Indian country. This year, the Administration is requesting another $20 million increase for the continuation of this multi-year presidential initiative. "This year's request constitutes the second investment in our commitment to bringing Indian law enforcement up to par with the rest of America," Gover said, "Last year the BIA spent 90% of the additional funds to provide the Tribes in the greatest need with more cops on the reservation. But we still need more cars, a communications system that will actually work, and even more cops to guarantee the safety of our public safety officers, and the residents of the reservations." The program increase will be invested in the hiring of more criminal investigators and uniformed police officers, upgrading radio systems, and strengthening basic detention services.

An additional $2.6 million increase has been slated for use to strengthen tribal court systems. Along

with the increase in BIA funding for Indian country law enforcement and public safety comes a requested increase in the Department of Justice (DOJ) for law enforcement on reservations. The DOJ money would be distributed through a grant program to Tribes.

The BIA's most basic responsibility is the management of lands held in trust for Indian Tribes and Indian people. The BIA is responsible for accounting for the land, allowing for its use at its greatest possible value, and distributing income to its owners. The BIA manages over 55 million acres of land (including 18 million acres of forest), 170,000 individual tracts of land, 100,000 active leases, 350,000 land owners and 2 million owner interests. By comparison, if you put all the trust land in one parcel, it would cover all of the District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Connecticut. "The central responsibility of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is the management and protection of Indian trust assets. Sadly, the United States has failed historically to provide the funds needed. This has been the case for many decades. The Clinton administration and Secretary Babbitt are the first to attack this longstanding problem in a systematic and comprehensive manner. With Congress' help, we can establish a trust management system that will meet our trust responsibilities well into the next century," said Assistant Secretary Gover. The resources allocated in this budget are designed to close the books on Indian trust management problems as we enter the next century by completing the replacement of core trust management systems, including the complete computerization and cleanup of all trust records in the Trust Asset and Accounting Management System (TAAMS). The 2000 budget request includes $100 million dollars for the Office of Special Trustee, which will provide $65.3 million for continued implementation of the Trust Management Improvement Project. "The TAAMS project is the largest single modernization program ever attempted by the BIA, and we will be successful. The TAAMS program is our chance to demonstrate to the Tribes and Congress the management expertise of the BIA. When the necessary resources are provided for this - "extremely important responsibility to the Tribes and the American Indian people," said Gover, "It truly is a matter of trust."

The protection of the environment is a long-standing principle of the Tribes, who for centuries have believed deeply in the protection of the earth and appropriate use of resources. This principle is universally held among American Indian people who have long understood that harmony with the earth belongs to those who recognize themselves as part of the ecosystem, and not as the masters of it. In this year's budget, a $3 million increase for environmental programs has been included in the BIA budget. Assistant Secretary Gover commented on the American Indian tradition of conservation and environmentalism, "For generations, the keepers of the hidden knowledge, available to all, but seen and sought out by only a few, have been American Indians. The heritage and mythology of America come from the first Americans, the Tribes, who have understood for centuries that the preservation and protection of the earth is for the benefit of all."

Also within the budget is a $1 million appropriation for a "Bring Back the Bison" program within the BIA. American bison and the American Indian are symbiotically linked. The bison, due to a misguided Federal policy designed to subdue the Tribes at the end of the last century, were within a breath of being exterminated at the beginning of the century. Tribes of the Northern and Southern Plains, along with Tribes in the Northwest and Southwest, have begun a program to reestablish the bison on Indian lands. The program has been extremely successful, reestablishing not only the bison, but also the buffalo culture and Tribal spiritual practices, and creating of hundreds of jobs for Tribal members raising and caring for the buffalo. Gover, a descendent of the Pawnee and Comanche Tribes, articulated the meaning of this program to the American Indian people. "At the turn of the last century, there was little doubt that American Indians and the buffalo would be a thing of the past. But we have both

survived. It is important to grow and maintain our bison, and along with the bison, the health and prosperity of the Tribes. This is important not just as a link to the past, but also as a gateway into the next millennium."