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Interior Secretary Don Hodel today pledged to work with tribal governments so that Indian reservations can share in economic prosperity and not be "islands surrounded by the rest of America."

Addressing a joint meeting of the National Congress of American Indians and the National Tribal Chairmen's Association in Tulsa, Okla., the Secretary also said that he does not plan to abolish the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) or to establish an additional agency to take over Indian trust responsibilities now administered by BIA.

Hodel lauded President Reagan's selection of Ross Swimmer, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, to be the new Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior. Swimmer is awaiting Senate confirmation.

"His knowledge of tribal and Indian affairs and his understanding and skill in modern business management will be of tremendous value in achieving success in America's Indian programs," Hodel said of the nominee.

Reaffirming President Reagan's commitment to Indian self-determination and a government-to-government relationship between the Department and the Tribes, Hodel said that if Tribes are to have strong, effective governments they will eventually have to develop sound tribal economies and set their own priorities.

"Only the Tribes can decide when they are ready to assume more independence and take on the responsibilities of self-determination," Hodel said.

"We recognize and accept that the progress and decision making must be individual to each Tribe," Hodel said. “We also recognize, as you must, that Indian Tribes are not and cannot be islands surrounded by the rest of America. and that economic, social and governmental development will progress as Tribes are able to take advantage of the strengths of the American economy.”

The Secretary said the Administration will continue supporting appropriations to help Tribes develop their economies and to allow Tribes to administer contracted programs.

"But Tribes cannot count on automatic financial increases," Hodel added "And new money --federal or local --will be available to Tribes that are willing to accept the challenge of economic, political and social development."

Hodel noted that Swimmer was co-chairman of the President's Commission on Indian Reservation Economies, and that following consultation with tribal leaders, "we plan to move forward on appropriate recommendations (of the commission), particularly additional procurement opportunities from the Federal Government, technical assistance for economic development and emphasis on Trust.

"I can assure you that the (commission’s) report did not mandate abolishing the BIA, but it did suggest more programs should be run by Tribes addressed immediately," Hodel said.

The Secretary said he did not expect to implement a recommendation of the commission for a separate agency to handle trust responsibility issues.

"A separate agency would result in a duplication of effort and loss of momentum and would not be in the best interests of the Tribes," Hodel said.

He said that one of Swimmer's top priorities after confirmation by the Senate will be to improve the BIA capability i~ administering its trust responsibilities.

"This Administration respects all treaties, acts of Congress and other agreements made with Indian Tribes and will administer its trust responsibility accordingly through the Bureau of Indian Affairs," Hodel said.

The Secretary emphasized, "We will continue our efforts to make the Bureau of Indian Affairs a well managed organization that is responsive to the needs of Indian Tribes and Indian people," Hodel said.

He said their is no plan to change the number of BIA field offices.

"Delegation of greater authority and responsibility to field offices coupled with more frequent and extensive communication with the fields should work to make the bureau more responsive to tribal needs" Hodel said.