

**STATEMENT OF KEN SALAZAR  
SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS  
ON THE PRIORITIES FOR INDIAN AFFAIRS**

**FEBRUARY 12, 2009**

Thank you, Chairman Dorgan, Vice Chairman Barrasso, and Members of the Committee.

This is my first hearing since being confirmed as Secretary of the Interior. I am proud that my first hearing as the Secretary of the Interior is about America's First Americans. I am also honored to appear before the Senate Indian Affairs Committee to discuss the Department of the Interior's role for Indian Affairs.

During his campaign for the Presidency, President Obama spoke out in support of empowering Indian people in the development of the national agenda. As President, he recognizes that federally recognized Indian tribes are sovereign, self-governing political entities that enjoy a government-to-government relationship with the United States government, as expressly recognized in the U.S. Constitution. I, too, am a strong supporter of the principle of tribal self-determination and will work to fully enable tribal self-governance.

As Secretary of the Interior, I will work hard to empower America's Native American communities by helping address economic development, education, and law enforcement and other major challenges faced in Indian country.

There are many challenges facing our Native American communities. I believe that together, we can create many opportunities for these communities to thrive and flourish. I am committed to restoring the integrity of the government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes. Together, through consultation and with a spirit of mutual respect and understanding, we can address these challenges and can create stronger economies and safer Native American communities.

I am committed to ensuring that the Department of the Interior fulfills the trust responsibility of the United States. I will also seek to resolve the unending litigation about the management of these lands and assets. I would also like to reiterate my commitment to the settlement of Indian water rights claims.

While there are many important priority issues for Indian country that I will address as Secretary, today I would like to discuss with you more fully four important areas for the Nation's Native American communities: Economic Opportunities, Energy Development and Climate Change, Education, and Law Enforcement.

### **Economic Opportunities**

For too long, Native Americans have experienced some of the most severe socioeconomic conditions in the United States. More than a quarter of all Native Americans live in poverty and unemployment rates reach 80 percent on some reservations. Real per-capita income of Indians is less than half of the U.S. level. Eight of the ten poorest counties in America include Indian reservations. Housing conditions in

many of these areas are inadequate, and about 14 percent of all reservation families have no electricity.

I believe that the Department of the Interior should be a partner with tribal communities to advance sustainable economic development. A good partnership between tribes and departmental programs in key areas will stimulate a much needed economic boost for tribal economies and the national economy. The Department's capacity to address infrastructure and employment needs through its programs will provide a framework for robust national economic development. Our programmatic outreach will extend from tribal water projects and loan guarantee programs to workforce training and transportation programs.

In addition, the economic stimulus package will provide much needed economic development for Native communities. The bill would provide funds for infrastructure and workforce development, and create thousands of jobs.

Today, approximately half of the 562 federally recognized tribes operate gaming facilities. This has created 670,000 jobs nationwide and provided \$11 billion to federal and state governments through taxes and other revenue. The vast majority of these gaming operations are small enterprises that provide jobs to tribal members. Gaming revenues are important tribal resources for funding education, healthcare, law enforcement, and other essential tribal government functions. As Secretary of the Interior, I will implement the regulatory framework established by the Indian Gaming

Regulatory Act and promote the government-to-government relationship between tribes and the federal government and continue to work with states and local governments on these matters.

### **Energy Development and Climate Change**

A defining issue of our time is energy and climate change. We must succeed as a Nation to create a new energy frontier. As Secretary of the Interior, I have been tasked by President Obama to take a key role in our moon shot to energy independence and addressing climate change. Indian lands can be a rich source of conventional fossil fuels. But they also have major renewable energy potential. One of the greatest opportunities for economic development for tribes can be the development of alternative energy sources, including solar, wind, and geothermal resources.

Indian country offers some of the premier wind energy sites in the United States. The Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development has identified 77 reservations that possess commercial-scale wind resources and the ability to support viable wind-based economies. Forty of these locations are in states that enacted a Renewable Portfolio Standard requiring utilities to purchase a certain percentage of their power from renewable sources.

Renewable energy projects could also spark creation of thousands of green-collar jobs. I look forward to exploring with our Native partners the potential for wind, geothermal, biomass and solar energy development that exists on those lands.

## **Education**

A key to success for the Nation's First Americans is a high-quality education. The Department of the Interior is responsible for 183 elementary and secondary schools and dormitories as well as two Bureau-operated post-secondary institutions. Our school systems serve approximately 47,000 students on or near 63 reservations in 23 states.

Tribes today are struggling to preserve their native languages. We will be examining ways to preserve those languages through the Indian education system. We must also examine the No Child Left Behind Act and its implementation and the issues it has raised in Indian schools. I agree with President Obama and Vice President Biden that our children and our country need a vision for a 21st century education in Indian schools. This begins by demanding more reform and accountability and asking parents to take responsibility for their children's success. An example of this is the Family and Child Education (FACE) program, administered by the Bureau of Indian Education, which provides funding for Indian students and their families and prepares children for Indian education opportunities through early childhood education. Participation of children in the FACE program reduces the need for school-age special education by 50 percent. Additionally, this vision includes recruiting, retaining, and rewarding teachers who teach in Bureau of Indian Education schools. I will work on implementing the President's plan to restore the promise of America's public education, and ensure that American Indian children are provided the opportunity to lead the world in creativity and success.

## **Law Enforcement**

Finally, I want to fight crime in Indian country. As Colorado's Attorney General, I led efforts to make communities safer, fight crime, prosecute gangs, and address youth and family violence. These same problems plague Indian country. The crime rates on most reservations are unacceptably high. I will use my law enforcement experience to work with the kinds of partnerships that will help bring about safer communities, which in turn create stronger communities.

The United States, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Justice Services, and tribal programs, provides public safety and judicial services to Indian tribes and their communities. The Department provides either directly or through Indian Self-Determination and Self-Governance contracts and compacts basic law enforcement services; local court services; detention and corrections programs; and professional training related to policing, detention and judicial services.

As Secretary, I plan to address several key issues relating to law enforcement in Indian country. Violent crime in Indian country must be aggressively confronted and we will continue to work with Tribes and the Department of Justice in this regard. We will continue to aggressively attack methamphetamine trafficking and abuse in Indian communities. In a 2006 survey, 74 percent of tribal law enforcement officials reported methamphetamine to be the leading threat to their tribes. The dramatic increase in the use of this drug has brought with it increases in domestic violence, child neglect, crimes against women, and weapons charges. I also plan to address the serious declining

conditions of detention facilities in Indian country as well as staffing needs for those facilities. And finally, I want to work on strengthening tribal court systems.

Safer communities mean stronger communities. We must continue to work together, the federal government, States, and tribes, to ensure the safety and security of our First Americans. It is a responsibility that I take very seriously.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views on some of the critical Native American issues with the Committee. I look forward to working with you. Thank you.