

STATEMENT OF INTERIOR SECRETARY GALE NORTON

BEFORE THE SENATE INDIAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

FEBRUARY 28, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairman, Members of the Committee,

This is my first appearance before Congress since my confirmation hearing and I am very pleased it is before the Indian Affairs Committee and its distinguished Chairman, my friend and fellow Coloradan, Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell. As you may know, I have twice appeared before this Committee, once in October 1997, and again in February 1998. I was here then to explain my position and firm belief in taking measures to reduce tobacco use among Indian children.

It has been just two months since the President asked me to be his Secretary of the Interior. This has been a period of intense learning about the many responsibilities and issues I am now facing as Secretary, including those related to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The mission of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is to enhance the quality of life of American Indians and Alaska Natives, to promote economic opportunity, and to protect and improve the management of trust assets of Indian tribes, individual Indians, and Alaska Natives.

In responding to this mission, I told Interior employees at our all employees meeting that we should think of ourselves as navigating the four C's: consultation, cooperation, communication - all in the service of conservation. I propose to employ consultation, cooperation, and communication in my working with tribal governments as well.

President Bush and I are both believers in the concept of Indian Self-Determination. We want to make advances in Self-Determination and Self-Governance during our tenure which we believe can be fostered through consultation and our mutual goal of better government.

I take very seriously my responsibility as the Trustee for Indian lands, trust moneys, and Federal obligations to the tribes under treaties and laws. In furtherance of that responsibility, we need to be certain that the requisite management skills are in place, including project management skills, for the critical work we are doing to reform Indian trust fund management. This ranges from the leasing of trust land to the collection and investment of income, and its disbursement and accounting to trust beneficiaries, be they tribes or individual Indians. I intend to advocate for Indians and tribal governments throughout this Administration.

I have had positive experiences in Colorado. As Attorney General from 1991 to 1999, I handled a number of important issues involving Native Americans. I had the privilege to negotiate personally two of the first Indian Gaming compacts--between the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute tribes and the State of Colorado.

My office played a large role in the ongoing negotiations over the scope and funding of the Animas-LaPlata project in Colorado. This project helped me to understand better the needs of the Tribes, state, and federal authorities and to assist in resolving economic, environmental, and political issues.

I also handled issues relating to oil and gas development on and near Colorado's Indian reservations, and understand the challenges associated with both conservation and development on trust lands. I hope this experience will serve both the tribes and the Nation well as we work to resolve energy problems facing this country.

I have learned a few things in my first weeks at Interior. The very day I took the oath of office, I found myself facing decisions on the fiscal year 2002 budget. Nearly one-quarter of Interior's funding is devoted to Indian nations, communities, and individuals. While this is a significant percentage, setting priorities for the Department in Indian Country is a monumental task. Which programs will best serve our Indian constituency, understanding that all programs require our attention and support?

One of the priorities that the President addressed during the campaign was education, including Indian education and school facilities. I share his philosophy that no child be left behind, and it will be my responsibility to help see that no Indian child is left behind. As you know, Indian school facilities are generally in poor condition. Some of the school buildings are a century old. The life expectancy of some of these buildings has been exceeded by decades.

The Congress appropriated \$292 million, or an additional \$159 million, to make a significant start in addressing this problem in fiscal year 2001. We will immediately provide \$136 million to replace seven schools. However, we have much more to do.

President Bush and I will continue to work with Congress to eliminate the current backlog of school repairs by 2006, while replacing older and more dilapidated schools. Schools with the most urgent needs will be given priority in the budget requests.

In addition, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) will work with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and tribal governments to make needed capital improvements while preserving the historic character of many of the Indian schools.

The BIA is responsible for 185 Indian elementary and secondary schools. About one-third of these schools are operated directly by the BIA while the other two-thirds are operated under contract or grants to Indian tribal entities. These schools have an enrollment of approximately 50,000 children and are spread throughout 23 states.

Over 120 participants - including educators from BIA-funded schools, outside Indian education organizations, and staff members from the BIA Office of Indian Education Programs-- recently met and agreed on five goals: 1) all children will read independently by the third grade; 2) 70% of the Indian student population will be proficient/advanced in reading and math; 3) individual student attendance rates will be 90% or better; 4) students will demonstrate knowledge of their tribal language and culture; and 5) there will be increased enrollment, retention, placement, and graduation rates at the post-secondary level.

I want to assure the Committee that I am committed to the goal of improving the quality of life in Indian communities and providing direct service in assisting tribes to strengthen public safety. A safe community with a sufficient number of law enforcement officers who are properly trained and equipped is the basic foundation for the overall effectiveness of tribal governments. To that end, I will work with tribal governments in their continuing law enforcement efforts and further pledge my full cooperation and assistance in this matter.

Finally, I would like to comment on a matter of very high priority for me and for my Department, and that is the matter of Indian trust reform and the importance of providing needed services to Indian trust beneficiaries.

As the Trustee, I clearly recognize the important obligations of the Department to put in place those systems, procedures, and people to fulfill our obligation to the trust beneficiaries, both individual Indians and Tribes. This is an enormous undertaking in correcting the errors and omissions of many decades.

Much progress has been made, including the new Trust Financial Accounting system (TFAS) which became fully operational early last year. A majority of other identified milestones have been reached; however, much remains to be done, including several very critical elements.

These include completing the BIA Trust Asset and Accounting Management System (or TAAMS). This is a much needed automated system that will track the land ownership and trust management of 55 million acres held in trust or restricted status by tens of thousands of Indian landowners and hundreds of Tribes. The implementation of this system is prefaced upon the cleanup of trust historical data dating back over a hundred years, and the reduction of the probate backlog that has occurred with the increasing fractionation of trust allotments. The amendments to the Indian Land Consolidation Act enacted by the 106th Congress, which address the issue of fractionated heirships, will permit greater efficiency in leasing these lands. These particular projects present huge challenges, but there is no doubt that they can be

concluded satisfactorily.

There are many other Indian issues of interest to this Committee, my Department, and tribal leaders. In my short time at Interior I have heard concerns about Indian gaming, the Federal acknowledgment process, and Indian land and water settlements, to name but a few. We will meet these challenges openly and will seek your guidance in these important issues. It is my heartfelt desire that this Committee and I begin and continue a process of consultation, cooperation, and communication that will strengthen tribal governments, help Indian people, and improve the education of America's Indian youth.