

Cabinet department heads to work with Tribes

KENNEDY continued
from front page

supply. In some reservations as many as 20 people live together just to get by."

"His secretaries were very knowledgeable and prepared," Kennedy said of the Tribal Nations Conference on her return to Grand Ronde. "They knew the statistics about Native Americans in all areas, but I know those statistics. That's not what I went to Washington to hear."

"What I hoped is to hear how we're going to turn this around."

And she said President Obama impressed her in that regard.

Perhaps the biggest issue of the day was building trust in the federal government among the nation's first peoples.

"I know that you may be skeptical that this time will be any different," Obama said. "You have every right to be and nobody would have blamed you if you didn't come today. But you did. And I know what an extraordinary leap of faith that is on your part."

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who emceed the day's events, acknowledged the federal record, but said, "We also live in a moment of great opportunity."

Obama took questions from almost a dozen attendees before panel discussions focused on economic development, natural resources, energy, environment, agriculture, public safety, housing, education, health care and labor.

Obama tasked Cabinet department heads with delivering plans for working with Indian Country within 90 days.

"I promised you we'd host this conference to develop an agenda that works for your communities," he said, "because I believe Washington can't — and shouldn't — dictate a policy agenda for Indian Country. Tribal nations do better when they make their own decisions. That's why we're here today."

Commerce Secretary and former Washington Gov. Gary Locke promised "more jobs" with a "focus on economic diversification." Along with Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Locke pointed to billions in stimulus funding earmarked for broadband Internet access.

Overall, the Obama administration earmarked \$3 billion in stimulus funding for Indian Country.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack promised management of federal forests that is "sensitive to sacred Native places and subsistence" activities; food assistance that contains both "improved nutritional value and access" for Native peoples.



Contributed photo

Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, left, met Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi during her trip to Washington, D.C., to attend the Tribal Nations Conference put on by President Barack Obama. Kennedy also met with several Cabinet department heads and pushed for appropriations for the Indian Health Care Improvement Act.

The People of the First Light, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, Mass., described being forgotten when it comes to services, and ignored when it comes to Tribal sovereignty.

"We don't get consultation," said Chairwoman Cheryl Andrews-Maltis.

The ocean-based Tribe traditionally lived on shellfish but reported harassment by Environmental Protection Agency officers for fishing in their traditional places.

Likewise, "In California, they don't do government-to-government with the Tribes," said a Tribal leader from the northern end of the state. "Tribes are denied subsistence activities and cultural gatherings along the coast."

Interior Assistant Secretary Larry Echo Hawk (Pawnee) quoted a 1886 U.S. Supreme Court case that called the states "the deadliest enemy of Native peoples."

"Hopefully," said Salazar, "the states will follow the Obama lead."

Environmental Protection Agency Director Lisa Jackson said that her agency was the first to affirm a cooperative Indian policy and promised a "next generation of partnership." She said she was working toward "clean energy, clean environment and clean jobs."

Jim Gray, Principal Chief of the

Osage Nation in Pawhuska, Okla., decried the many years that Indian Country has been fighting the Interior Department "for mismanaging Indian Trust funds. Badly needed Tribal funds are being diverted to fight these claims," he said.

"The 13 years of litigation is a blemish," said Salazar. "The history you describe is true, but we are committed to changing that. We're working very hard on it. Stay tuned. There's more to come."

Kennedy attended a meeting chaired by Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and attended by other House leaders. Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-Rhode Island) sat down next to her. He looked at her name tag.

Kennedy, the son of the late U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, laughed and said, "I knew I had a Native American background."

Tribal leaders universally expressed appreciation for Obama's conference effort. They held out hope that a new relationship with the federal government is under way, but pent up exasperation could not be stopped.

"I went on a rant," Kennedy said of her meeting with Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. "Tribal peoples get less money for health care (\$2,800 per person per year) than the average citizen (\$10,000), less than those on Medicare (\$8,000), less than those on Medicaid (\$6,000), less than prisoners (\$4,000). You wonder why we have such a high incidence of diabetes and heart disease. That's why."

"These are not handouts," Kennedy said in her OPB interview, and then again directly to Sebelius. "We pre-paid for our health care with our land."

The Indian Health Care Improvement Act has passed the House and now is in the Senate, said Kennedy. One of the difficulties with the bill is that it is currently in "appropriations" that have to be reauthorized every year, instead of "entitlements" that are automatically reauthorized.

Still, she said, increases this year in budgets affecting Tribal peoples are the largest in 20 years.

"I get it," said Obama. "I'm on your side. I understand what it means to be an outsider ... you will not be forgotten as long as I'm in this White House."

Kennedy went to Washington to get solutions, but this understanding, at the top level of government, of the world that Native Americans live in is what impressed her most.

Tribal Council members June Sell-Sherer and Valorie Sheker also traveled to Washington, D.C., and attended meetings with Sebelius and Labor Secretary Hilda Solis. ■

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