

Obama White House establishes Council on Native American Affairs

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

President Barack Obama signed an Executive Order on Sept. 26, 2012, establishing, at the cabinet level, the White House Council on Native American Affairs.

In a press conference held on June 27, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell said that the council was "another important step advancing Tribal self-determination and improving the quality of life for Native Americans."

"With his executive order, the president reaffirmed his commitment to Indian Country and set a precedent for future administrations," said Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno.

"I'm pleased to see that President Obama recognizes the unique status of our Tribal nations and values our government-to-government relationship. The order is a step in

the right direction and will help improve the coordination of programs and resources directed to Indian Country. While there is much to be done, this commitment provides an avenue for future engagement that will continue to benefit Indian Country for years to come."

Among the members of the council are secretaries from virtually every major federal department, including State, Treasury, Defense, Justice, Agriculture, Commerce and Veterans Affairs.

It aims "to honor treaties and recognize Tribes' inherent sovereignty and right to self-government," according to the Executive Order.

It "establishes a national policy to ensure that the federal government engages in a true and lasting government-to-government relationship with federally recognized Tribes."

Since 2009, Jewell said, Tribes and federal agencies have held annual government-to-government meetings.

"This announcement is the next step. It is an outgrowth of the administration's very successful work in many different cabinet agencies," Jewell said. "This executive order will institutionalize this relationship."

The group will meet a minimum of three times a year to "improve coordination of federal programs and the use of resources available to Tribal communities."

"The President is firmly committed to building a nation-to-nation relationship," said Jodi Gillette, Obama's senior policy adviser for Native American Affairs. "We want to make sure all the things we've done in the last four years keep." Still, she said, "We need to do more and we need to do it better."

She noted that the administration is promoting self-governance because it works.

In response to questions from the press, Jewell said, "We won't be able to do our work without Tribal conversations."

"I envision, to begin with, intro-

ducing the council itself. I want to make sure people understand the role. As it unfolds, to make it effective, we'll have to narrow focus to topical issues; bring in experts to represent the interests of Tribes. We'll find opportunities to engage the Tribal press every step of the way. We're going to be actively involved with Tribes and Tribal representatives. We want them to outline their desires firsthand with members of this council."

Funding shortfalls are being reconsidered, she noted.

"The Office of Management and Budget has a very important role in pulling together the president's budget. Tribal issues will be brought to the fore. It is very important for colleagues to know that this puts these issues on the table," Jewell said.

"We cannot ignore a history of mistreatment and destructive policies that have hurt Tribal communities," said the Executive Order. It recognizes that self-determination "is necessary for successful and prospering communities," and that restoring Tribal lands "helps foster Tribal self-determination." ■



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Tribal Council member
June Sherer

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