

# Haaland confirmed to lead Department of the Interior

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

New Mexico Congresswoman Deb Haaland, a citizen of the Laguna Pueblo Nation, became the first Native American Cabinet member on Monday, March 15, when the U.S. Senate confirmed her nomination 51-40 to lead the Department of the Interior.

Haaland also became the first Native American to lead the federal department that handles the government’s trust responsibility to the more than 574 Tribal nations in the United States.

Reaction in Oregon was swift and positive.

“Deb Haaland’s confirmation hopefully opens a path for Native Tribes across this nation with many challenges with the department,” said Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Steve Bobb Sr. “Native people view this as a big step for Indigenous people and a great day.”

Grand Ronde Tribal Council member Denise Harvey met Haaland in February 2019 while attending the National Indian Gaming Association’s Legislative Summit in Washington, D.C.

“I think she will do very well in the position,” Harvey said. “One of the things about Deb that I’ve known and all of the times that I’ve had the opportunity to work with her is that she always listens and she always shows up. She’s very knowledgeable about Indian Country and the Tribes, and she



Contributed photo

**Tribal Council member Denise Harvey, left, met with former New Mexico Rep. Deb Haaland in Washington, D.C., in February 2019 while attending the National Indian Gaming Association’s Legislative Summit. Haaland is an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo Nation and was confirmed as Secretary of the Interior on Monday, March 15, becoming the first Native American Cabinet member in the history of the United States.**

just has a very fair, equitable kind of disposition about her.

“It’s a day in history for a Native woman to be in the position for the first time and I think she is a great lady for the job. I’ve always really

respected her.”

Haaland, 60, earned degrees from the University of New Mexico and its Law School. She ran her own small business producing and canning Pueblo Salsa and became the first chairwoman elected to the Laguna Development Corp. Board of Directors, overseeing the business operations of the second largest Tribal gaming enterprise in New Mexico.

She ran for New Mexico lieutenant governor in 2014 and then became the first Native American woman to lead the Democratic State Party in New Mexico. She was elected to Congress in 2018, becoming one of the first Native American women to serve in the House of Representatives and was nominated to serve as Secretary of the Interior by President Biden.

“Secretary Haaland’s lifetime of service demonstrates her strong commitment to defending our public lands and waters – natural treasures that make countless contributions to the spirit and vitality of communities and local economies throughout Oregon and across America,” said Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley in a press release sent out moments after the vote was final. “At a time when climate chaos is fueling more catastrophic wildfires, deadly winter storms, extreme droughts and powerful hurricanes, that kind of responsible environmental stewardship couldn’t be more important to the

health and safety of our families.

“I am also thrilled that for the first time a Native American woman will be at the helm of the agency that oversees programs directly affecting Indian Country. This is an invaluable milestone in our work to turn the page on America’s long history of broken promises with Tribal nations, and I look forward to working with Secretary Haaland to support Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.”

The Klamath Tribes in southern Oregon called Haaland’s confirmation a “beacon of hope” in the long history of challenging relationships with the Department of the Interior.

“It is heartening to think that an Indigenous woman will be leading the Department of Interior,” said Klamath Tribal Secretary Roberta Frost. “During her confirmation hearing, Secretary Haaland talked about protecting Mother Earth. This is so important to us as a Tribe.”

“As a matriarch herself, Secretary Haaland understands the complex issues and decisions Tribes make,” Klamath Tribal Council member Willa Powless said. “This confirmation is historic in so many ways, but for the first time it feels like Tribes will be understood and listened to when advocating for our people.”

Haaland was sworn in on Thursday, March 18, by Vice President Kamala Harris. ■

## ‘It takes three weeks to get through one lesson so that every kid is on the same page’

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said. “If we lose all of our speakers and we lose our language, and that’s a huge part of our culture that we won’t be able to get back.”

Today after centuries of colonization, the number of fluent speakers has dwindled to an estimated double-digit number.

Holsclaw is one of the seven Chinuk Wawa teachers in the Grand Ronde Language Department. She is also the department’s outreach coordinator, which means she is responsible for finding ways to interest more people in learning the language.

She began learning Chinuk Wawa as a child. While she was learning to say “hello” and “good-bye” in preschool classes, her older sister, Ali Holsclaw, began to take adult classes.

The sisters continued to learn the language, becoming two of the few fluent speakers. That eventually led them to teaching.

But unlike her sister, Zoey started her position in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, when all classes shifted to an online format.

On her first day, she said, she was one of the only ones working in the building after someone in her department tested positive for COVID-19 and her new co-workers

were quarantining at home.

“At first, I was really nervous about teaching virtually and probably the first couple of months I hated it because none of the kids want to turn their cameras on and they don’t want to participate,” Zoey said. “But now that I’m getting into a swing of things, I kind of like it. But we’re also going to in-person teaching next week, so things are being thrown up in the air again.”

Throughout the pandemic, Zoey intermittently worked from home. COVID-19 is not something she is happy about, but working remotely gave her time to be at home with her 1-year-old daughter and see her achieve baby milestones.

Her daughter even participated in teaching classes from home one day, mimicking her mom by holding up Chinuk Wawa vocabulary flashcards to the virtual class.

But teaching remotely takes even longer, and Zoey says she still feels pressure to keep their language alive.

“It takes three weeks to get

through one lesson so that every kid is on the same page,” she said. “I could just move on, but I don’t. The goal is to create speakers, and so I don’t want to leave kids behind when they don’t show up because that just seems like the opposite of what I want to do.”

In her office, she has a cabinet full of books and binders of Native languages no one speaks anymore. She attributes the loss of those languages to the forceful relocations of Tribes to reservations and assimilation practices that continued into the 20th century.

One such practice was the federal removal of Grand Ronde’s Tribal sovereignty in 1954 in what was also known as the Termination era.

“Our area was affected by assimilation, and termination had a huge effect on the people here, especially when it comes to learning their culture and having pride in who they are,” Zoey said. “There is still pride there. It’s just when you grow up in an area where you can’t really show that, it kind of

is suppressed and kind of hard to get involved when you’ve gone your whole life being told that you can’t be Native.”

Termination meant the Tribe no longer had recognition from the United States government, losing what was promised in signed treaties and federal aid.

However, in 1983, a group of Grand Ronde Tribal members raised enough money to go to Washington, D.C., to appeal to Congress. They won, regaining recognition. But 30 years of damage was already done.

“There’s a lot of cultural shame and trauma that has kind of happened to our people, and that kind of sits with a lot of our Elders. And so there’s shame in wanting to learn the language, because people feel like they should already know it, but they don’t,” Zoey said. “But since the pandemic, there have been quite a few others that have expressed interest in learning, so that’s something that I’m wanting to explore more as the outreach coordinator.”

On March 6, the U.S. Senate approved the largest investment in Native programs with \$31 billion going to Native communities, including \$20 million to mitigate the effect of the coronavirus on Native languages, as part of the COVID-19 American Rescue Plan. ■

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