

TRIBE LAUDS COBELL SETTLEMENT

PLUMMER – The Coeur d’Alene Tribe praised President Barack Obama for settling the long-standing Cobell class-action lawsuit concerning the U.S. government’s handling of its trust responsibilities.

The \$3.4 billion settlement ends a 13-year legal battle over how the Department of Interior mishandled more than 300,000 individual Indian land trust accounts.

“The President is a man of his word. He has kept his word on meeting with us and on settling the Cobell litigation,” said Coeur d’Alene Tribe Chairman Chief Allan. “Today marks a new day for a great relationship with the federal government and a new found respect for tribes. Long past are the broken promises.”

The federal government will spend \$2 billion to unravel a very complex trust system, in which individual Indians can own tiny fractions of a single parcel of land. In some cases on the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation, forty or fifty individuals can have a piece of land, making it impossible to develop or sell. The government’s settlement includes plans to buy back these fractions from individual owners until it tribal governments have a majority ownership.

"With this announcement, we take an important step towards a sincere reconciliation between the trust beneficiaries and the federal government and lay the foundation for more effective management of Indian trust assets in the future," President Obama said. "I urge Congress to act swiftly to correct this longstanding injustice and to remember that no special appropriations are required."

The money will come from a trust fund for judgments within the Department of Justice.

The settlement also includes \$1.4 billion for a group of more than 300,000 Indians. Each account holder would receive \$1,000 for historical accounting claims. The Coeur d’Alene Tribe was not listed as a plaintiff and it’s not known if any individual Coeur d’Alene Tribal members will be receiving money from the settlement.

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said the agreement was an important first step to resolve years of acrimonious litigation between trust beneficiaries and the U.S. Government.

“Resolving this issue has been a top priority of President Obama, and this administration has worked in good faith to reach a settlement that is both honorable and responsible. This historic step will allow Interior to move forward and address the educational, law enforcement, and economic development challenges we face in Indian Country.”

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said the agreement marks a new direction for the country.

“Over the past thirteen years, the parties have tried to settle this case many, many times, each time unsuccessfully,” said Attorney General Eric Holder. "But today we turn the page. This settlement is fair to the plaintiffs, responsible for the United States, and provides a path forward for the future.”

The problems of fractionating land stems from the Dawes Act of 1887, which was intended to force Indians into becoming farmers. The government divided tribal lands and allocated them to tribal members, typically at 160 acres or less. The government was supposed to hold the land in trust for 25 years and send any money earned from it back to

individual Indians. Over the years, the agreement became permanent and the heirs of the original allottees held smaller and smaller portions of land as it was passed down from generation to generation.

The lawsuit was filed when Elouise Cobell, the lead plaintiff in the suit, alleged the government wasn't tracking the lands and the owners weren't being paid. Cobell is a member of the Blackfeet tribe in Montana.

The settlement still needs the approval of the courts and Congress.