

President Obama's signs Indian Country's Trust Reform Bill into Law

Heather Keen/Coeur d'Alene Tribe

Washington, DC – Earlier today, President Barack Obama signed the Indian Trust Asset Reform Act or H.R. 812 into law. This is the first Indian policy bill to pass this Congress and many tribal leaders are calling it the most significant piece of trust reform legislation to come out of Congress in two decades.

Indian tribes who choose to participate now have the ability to manage their tribal assets such as land and natural resources currently held in trust and managed by the federal government. Tribes that volunteer to participate in the program will submit a management plan to the Secretary of the Department of Interior that lists the trust assets and details the tribe's management objectives and priorities.

"For years, we've been asking to manage our own resources and tribal assets and this law gives us the ability to set our own priorities and make our own choices based on what is best for our tribe," Chairman Chief Allan of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. "We're grateful to Congressman Simpson and Senator Crapo for working so hard to get this bill passed and to President Obama for handing the control of tribal assets back to tribes," he added.

Congressman Mike Simpson (R-ID) sponsored the bill in the United States House of Representatives, where it passed by a voice vote in February of this year. Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID) introduced a companion bill in the Senate and led the charge to ensure its passage earlier this month. The Senate bill was cosponsored by Senators Jim Risch and Patty Murray. Representatives Heck, Cole, Kilmer, DelBene, Labrador, Reichert, McMorris Rodgers, Pocan, Jones, Gosar and Newhouse co-sponsored the bill in the House.

"History has shown us that Tribes contribute in a major way to our local economy," Senator Crapo said. "Federal regulation has helped to stifle this development and it is appropriate that this legislation has been conceived from the ground up with tribal members, who now have a larger say in developing resource plans for their own assets that can create lasting employment."

"This legislation is a step forward for tribes in how they manage their assets," said Representative Simpson. "Instead of the complicated and inconsistent bureaucratic process tribes currently go through, H.R. 812 aims to streamline this practice to provide tribes with the necessary tools to promote economic development."

"We're thrilled about this. Many in Indian Country have been working on this issue for a decade or more. It makes sense to us – who would know better how to manage tribal trust resources than tribes themselves?" said Ernie Stensgar, the Vice-Chairman of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. Stensgar testified in

front of Congress on the benefits of this bill and also serves as the Chairman of the Trust Reform Committee for the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians.

"This piece of legislation is a great example of the advocacy and strength of our regional tribal organization - the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians - and the legacy of strong leadership dedicated and fiercely committed to holding the United States accountable to upholding its trust responsibility," said ATNI President Fawn Sharp.

The bill also provides for the restructuring of the Office of Special Trustee (OST), which was intended to be a temporary entity that would oversee certain financial reforms of Indian trust funds at the Department of Interior. Despite having completed the reforms it was tasked with, OST's role and its budget have expanded over the years, taking money from other BIA programs that have been facing budget decrease despite growing need. The law will transfer the necessary and relevant activities OST performs to the Undersecretary of the Department of Interior, creating efficiencies that will provide an immediate benefit to Indian Country.

The National Congress of American Indians will hold a special session to discuss this new law and its implications at its Midyear Conference next week in Spokane, Washington. This breakout will take place at 1:30 – 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, June 28th at the Spokane Convention Center. Discussion will be led off by Vice Chairman Ernie Stensgar, Coeur d'Alene Tribe, who has been at the forefront of efforts to advance the legislation for many years. In addition to the new law, this session will address other areas of the trust reform effort, including Department of the Interior's new Rights-of-Way Regulations; an update on the Land Buy-Back Program; Interior's goal of place 500,000 acres in trust; and discussion with Office of the Special Trustee.