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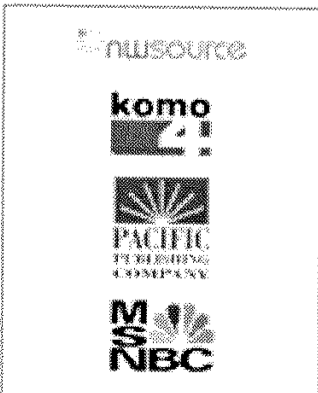
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OPINION

Friday, July 28, 2006

Indian trust is well-managed by U.S.

By ROSS O. SWIMMER
GUEST COLUMNIST

In his July 16 column, Mark Trahan says, "It's time for the United States to keep its word. That's what a trustee is supposed to do." I wanted to add that in fact, with great help from tribal leaders and individual Indians, that is exactly what staff at the Department of the Interior has been working to do.

It was well-documented that Indian trust was greatly in need of reform; while there is more work to be done, I'm proud of the fact that the management of the Indian trust looks very different today than it did even five years ago.

Seattle is one of the cities at the forefront of our reform efforts. For the first time in history, Interior has hired skilled fiduciary trust officers across Indian Country to work directly with Indian trust account holders. As part of that effort, we hired trust officers in three urban areas with large populations of Indian beneficiaries, including Seattle. Local Fiduciary Trust Officer Cynthia Metivier is dedicated to working directly with account holders in the Northwest to answer questions about their accounts and trust assets.

Add to that, Indian trust beneficiaries now can call a toll-free information center where staff will help them receive answers to their trust questions (1-888-678-6836). Technology is being improved across the nation, including systems by which trust funds get collected, deposited and distributed.

To ensure accountability to beneficiaries, Interior reconciles cash receipts on a daily basis and financial assets on a monthly basis. Our accounting system is the same as one in major private trust corporations and is audited every year.

We are beginning to issue asset statements to account holders that include information about trust property owned, lease holders and more. Staff is focusing on reducing backlogs of probate and land appraisals. Today tribes can work with new BLM Indian Lands Surveyors on long-overdue survey needs. And, Indian records are being imaged, preserved and stored for future generations in the new American Indian Records Repository, a state-of-the-art records storage center.

Members of Congress, staff at Interior and leaders in Indian Country continue to work on additional trust reforms and to find solutions to the serious problems that persist in Indian Country -- such as trust land "fractionation" that, because of early probate codes results in small parcels of trust land that are owned by hundreds or even thousands of people, and minuscule trust payments to individual account holders.

I realize the Cobell litigation is what dominates the news, but I think it is more important to the Indian trust beneficiary to know that Interior takes its job of trustee delegate very seriously. Indian Affairs staff across the department -- more than 90 percent of whom are American Indians -- are working to meet that goal.

Ross O. Swimmer is special trustee for American Indians in the U.S. Department of the Interior. He was elected to three terms as principal chief of the Cherokee Nation.

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