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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

**EPA Reaffirms 20 Years of Partnership with Indian Tribes**

(Washington, D.C.-September 24, 2004) The Environmental Protection Agency's commitment to the partnership between the agency and Indian Tribes was reaffirmed Thursday at an Open House commemorating the 20th anniversary of EPA's Indian Policy. This policy entrusted EPA with the responsibility of supporting the role of Tribal governments in protecting the environment and public health in Indian Country.

"This is an excellent way to celebrate the culture of American Indians with colleagues and friends," said Steve Johnson, EPA's Deputy Administrator. "In this 20th year of our EPA Indian Policy, I am pleased that representatives from Tribal Organizations and the U.S. Forest Service have joined us to acknowledge the achievements of Native Americans and their contributions to this Nation."

"I am proud to be a part of two significant events this week- the opening of the nation's first museum dedicated to the cultural achievements of Native Americans- and the reaffirmation of the EPA's Indian Policy," said Carol Jorgensen, Director of EPA's American Indian Environmental Office. "We have waited a long time for this historical moment which recognizes the indigenous peoples and honors our vibrant cultures."

In 1984, EPA became the first federal agency to adopt a formal Indian Policy of working with federally recognized tribes on a government-to-government basis. The United States has a unique legal relationship with tribal governments based on the constitution, treaties, statutes, executive orders, and court decisions. This relationship includes a recognition of the right of tribes as sovereign governments to self-determination and an acknowledgment of the federal government's trust responsibility to the tribes.

The EPA Tribal Program has made important progress since the policy was adopted including establishing the American Indian Environmental Office to manage EPA's National Indian Program, increasing the funding and staffing of EPA tribal programs, working with tribes and Congress to amend three of the core program statutes to allow tribes to directly assume program authority, and establishing the Tribal Operations Committee.

Earlier in the week, EPA participated in the Grand Opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. EPA employees also marched in a Native Nations Procession along with many tribes, tribal and non-tribal organizations and other Federal agencies that kicked off a week-long series of events. Information about EPA's Indian Program is available at: <http://www.epa.gov/indian/> . Information about the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian is at: <http://www.nmai.si.edu/> .



September 17, 2004

**MEMORANDUM**

**SUBJECT:** EPA Indian Policy

In 1984, EPA became the first Federal agency to adopt a formal Indian Policy (copy attached). Today I am proud to formally reaffirm this Policy, which embodies the core principle of working with Federally recognized Tribes on a government-to-government basis. The United States has a unique legal relationship with Tribal governments based on the Constitution, treaties, statutes, Executive Orders, and court decisions. This relationship includes a recognition of the right of Tribes as sovereign governments to self-determination, and an acknowledgment of the Federal government's trust responsibility to the Tribes.

The EPA Tribal Program has come a long way since the Indian Policy was first adopted. Important progress includes establishing the American Indian Environmental Office to manage EPA's National Indian Program, increasing the funding and staffing of EPA Tribal programs, working with Tribes and Congress to amend three of our core program statutes to allow Tribes to directly assume program authority, establishing the Tribal Operations Committee to advise EPA on Tribal matters, and reaching a substantial portion of the EPA workforce with our "Working Effectively with Tribal Governments" training.

I am proud of the success EPA has had in working with Tribes, and I realize that significant opportunities for progress remain. I pledge that the Agency will continue to build strong partnerships with Tribal governments to protect human health and the environment in Indian country.

/s/ Michael O. Leavitt

Michael O. Leavitt

11/8/84

## **EPA Policy for the Administration of Environmental Programs on Indian Reservations**

### INTRODUCTION

The President published a Federal Indian Policy on January 24, 1983, supporting the primary role of Tribal Governments in matters affecting American Indian reservations. That policy stressed two related themes: (1) that the Federal Government will pursue the principle of Indian "self-government" and (2) that it will work directly with Tribal Governments on a "government-to-government" basis.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has previously issued general statements of policy which recognized the importance of Tribal Governments in regulatory activities that impact reservation environments. It is the purpose of this statement to consolidate and expand on existing EPA Indian Policy statement in a manner consistent with the overall Federal position in support of the Tribal "self-government" and "government-to-government" relations between Federal and Tribal Governments. This statement sets forth the principles that will guide the Agency in dealing with Tribal Governments and in responding to the problems of environmental management on American Indian reservations in order to provide guidance for EPA program managers in the conduct of the Agency's congressionally mandated responsibilities. As such, it applies to EPA only and does not articulate policy for other Agencies in the conduct of their respective responsibilities.

It is important to emphasize that the implementation of regulatory programs which will realize these principles in Indian Reservations cannot be accomplished immediately. Effective implementation will take careful and conscientious work by EPA, the Tribes and many others. In many cases, it will require changes in applicable statutory authorities and regulations. It will be necessary to proceed in a carefully phased way, to learn from successes and failures, and to gain experience. Nonetheless, by beginning work on the priority problems that exist now and continuing in the direction established under these principles, over time we can significantly enhance environmental quality on reservation lands.

### POLICY

In carrying out our responsibilities on Indian reservations, the fundamental objective of the Environmental Protection Agency is to protect human health and the environment. The keynote of this effort will be to give special consideration to Tribal interests in making Agency policy, and to insure the close involvement of Tribal Governments in making decisions and managing environmental programs affecting reservation lands. To meet this objective, the Agency will pursue the following principles:

- 1. THE AGENCY STANDS READY TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH INDIAN TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS ON A ONE-TO-ONE BASIS (THE "GOVERNMENT-TO-GOVERNMENT" RELATIONSHIP), RATHER THAN AS SUBDIVISIONS OF OTHER GOVERNMENTS.**

EPA recognizes Tribal Governments as sovereign entities with primary authority and responsibility for the reservation populace. Accordingly, EPA will work directly with Tribal Governments as the independent authority for reservation affairs, and not as political subdivisions of States or other governmental units.

- 2. THE AGENCY WILL RECOGNIZE TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS AS THE PRIMARY PARTIES FOR SETTING STANDARDS, MAKING ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY DECISIONS AND MANAGING PROGRAMS FOR RESERVATIONS, CONSISTENT WITH AGENCY STANDARDS AND REGULATIONS.**

In keeping with the principle of Indian self-government, the Agency will view Tribal Governments as the appropriate non-federal parties for making decisions and carrying out program responsibilities affecting Indian reservations, their environments, and the health and welfare of the reservation populace. Just as EPA's

deliberations and activities have traditionally involved the interests and/or participation of State Governments, EPA will look directly to Tribal Governments to play this lead role for matters affecting reservation environments .

**3. THE AGENCY WILL TAKE AFFIRMATIVE STEPS TO ENCOURAGE AND ASSIST TRIBES IN ASSUMING REGULATORY AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RESERVATION LANDS.**

The Agency will assist interested Tribal Governments in developing programs and in preparing to assume regulatory and program management responsibilities for reservation lands. Within the constraints of EPA's authority and resources, this aid will include providing grants and other assistance to Tribes, similar to what we provide State Governments. The Agency will encourage Tribes to assume delegable responsibilities, (i.e. responsibilities which the Agency has traditionally delegated to State Governments for non-reservation lands) under terms similar to those governing delegations to States.

Until Tribal Governments are willing and able to assume full responsibility for delegable programs, the Agency will retain responsibility for managing programs for reservations (unless the State has an expressed grant of jurisdiction from Congress sufficient to support delegation to the State Government). Where EPA retains such responsibility, the Agency will encourage the Tribe to participate in policy-making and to assume appropriate lesser or partial roles in the management of reservation programs.

**4. THE AGENCY WILL TAKE APPROPRIATE STEPS TO REMOVE EXISTING LEGAL AND PROCEDURAL IMPEDIMENTS TO WORKING DIRECTLY AND EFFECTIVELY WITH TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS ON RESERVATION PROGRAMS.**

A number of serious constraints and uncertainties in the language of our statutes and regulations have limited our ability to work directly and effectively with Tribal Governments on reservation problems. As impediments in our procedures, regulations or statutes are identified which limit our ability to work effectively with Tribes consistent with this Policy, we will seek to remove those impediments.

**5. THE AGENCY, IN KEEPING WITH THE FEDERAL TRUST RESPONSIBILITY, WILL ASSURE THAT TRIBAL CONCERNS AND INTERESTS ARE CONSIDERED WHENEVER EPA'S ACTIONS AND/OR DECISIONS MAY AFFECT RESERVATION ENVIRONMENTS.**

EPA recognizes that a trust responsibility derives from the historical relationship between the Federal Government and Indian Tribes as expressed in certain treaties and Federal Indian Law. In keeping with that trust responsibility, the Agency will endeavor to protect the environmental interests of Indian Tribes when carrying out its responsibilities that may affect the reservations.

**6. THE AGENCY WILL ENCOURAGE COOPERATION BETWEEN TRIBAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO RESOLVE ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS OF MUTUAL CONCERN.**

Sound environmental planning and management require the cooperation and mutual consideration of neighboring governments, whether those governments be neighboring States, Tribes, or local units of government. Accordingly, EPA will encourage early communication and cooperation among Tribes, States and local Governments. This is not intended to lend Federal support to any one party to the jeopardy of the interests of the other. Rather, it recognizes that in the field of environmental regulation, problems are often shared and the principle of comity between equals and neighbors often serves the best interests of both.

**7. THE AGENCY WILL WORK WITH OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES WHICH HAVE RELATED RESPONSIBILITIES ON INDIAN RESERVATION TO ENLIST**

**THEIR INTEREST AND SUPPORT IN COOPERATIVE EFFORTS TO HELP TRIBES ASSUME ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAM RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RESERVATIONS.**

EPA will seek and promote cooperation between Federal agencies to protect human health and the environment on reservations. We will work with other agencies to clearly identify and delineate the roles, responsibilities and relationships of our respective organizations and to assist Tribes in developing and managing environmental programs for reservation lands.

**8. THE AGENCY WILL STRIVE TO ASSURE COMPLIANCE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL STATUTES AND REGULATIONS ON INDIAN RESERVATIONS.**

In those cases where facilities owned or managed by Tribal Governments are not in compliance with federal environmental statutes, EPA will work cooperatively with Tribal leadership to develop means to achieve compliance, providing technical support and consultation as necessary to enable Tribal facilities to comply. Because of the distinct status of Indian Tribes and the complex legal issues involved, direct EPA action through the judicial or administrative process will be considered where the Agency determines, in its judgment, that: (1) a significant threat to human health or the environment exists, (2) such action would reasonably be expected to achieve effective results in a timely manner, and (3) the Federal Government cannot utilize other alternatives to correct the problem in a timely fashion.

In those cases where reservation facilities are clearly owned or managed by private parties and there is no substantial Tribal interest or control involved, the Agency will endeavor to act in cooperation with the affected Tribal Government, but will otherwise respond to noncompliance by private parties on Indian reservations as the Agency would to noncompliance by the private sector elsewhere in the country. When the Tribe has a substantial proprietary interest in, or control over, the privately owned or managed facility, EPA will respond as described in the first paragraph above.

**9. THE AGENCY WILL INCORPORATE THESE INDIAN POLICY GOALS INTO ITS PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES INCLUDING ITS BUDGET, OPERATING GUIDANCE, LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES, MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM AND ONGOING POLICY AND REGULATION DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES.**

It is a central purpose of this effort to ensure that the principles of this Policy are effectively institutionalized by incorporating them into the Agency's ongoing and long-term planning and management processes. Agency managers will include specific programmatic actions designed to resolve problems on Indian reservations in the Agency's existing fiscal year and long-term planning and management processes.

William D. Ruckelshaus

