

Members of President Obama's Cabinet Address NCAI's Legislative Summit in Washington, D.C.

WASHINGTON—March 4, 2008—The National Congress of American Indians Executive Council Winter Session focused on Indian Country's legislative goals for the 111th Congress and the Obama Administration, including addresses by Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson and White House Director of Intergovernmental Affairs Cecelia Munoz.

“It is encouraging to see so many new members of the Obama Administration and members of Congress engaging in Indian issues with tribal leaders,” said NCAI President Joe A. Garcia. “These high level meetings set us on the right course as we work to ensure we have a place at the table early on in this new Administration.”

Secretary Chu told tribal delegates and conference attendees that he takes the responsibility and commitment to sovereign nations very seriously, and will prove it by fully empowering a tribal office in the energy department and holding a summit on issues that touch Indian Country.

“It is important for policy makers to hear tribal leader's concerns,” Chu said. “It is the obligation of the department to include American Indians and Alaska Natives in the decision making process. Indian Country must have a seat at the table. The challenges are great but the possibilities are greater.”

Secretary Napolitano said she understands tribal consultation comes before decisions are made. In an effort to move that agenda along, she released a draft consultation policy and solicited input from NCAI and tribes, especially those hit by natural disasters and located along the borders.

“For tribes that are on the borders of Mexico and Canada, we need to work together in a special way because we have tribes and families on both sides of the borders,” Napolitano said. “As we tighten up requirements to show lawful presence and immigration status and the like, we need to take into account how tribes will be a little bit different. We need to build that into the consultation policy from the outset.”

Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar told tribal leaders his department will assist tribes to harness the powers of the sun and wind or look at geothermal resources for economic development.

“We must make sure Native American communities are participants and beneficiaries of the new virtual energy revolution,” he said. “As we move forward Indian Country should not be left behind.”

Salazar also highlighted education and public safety as priorities of his department.

“We know we have high education challenges with respect to Native American communities,” he said. “Our most serious responsibility is that we have 49,000 children in Indian schools and we must do the best we can for them. We cannot leave our children behind.”

Finally Salazar committed to resolving the trust reform settlement and addressing the recent Supreme Court decision in *Carcieri v. Salazar*.

“We have responsibility rooted in the constitution and the fundamental principles of government to government relationships, and I intend to do everything I can to uphold those responsibilities,” he said, referring to the trust settlement case.

As for *Carcieri v. Salazar*, Salazar said he is troubled by the decision and called it ambiguous.

“I pledge the policies and programs of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) is a policy that has worked for tribes and we will examine our options in the department as well as congressional fixes to the case,” Salazar said. “We will not step back, we will move forward and will need your help.”

Lisa Jackson, Administrator for the Environmental Protection Agency said we have much to do to ensure that communities impacted by environmental degradation have a seat and voice at the table, including tribes.

“I’m excited to join you, the very first environmentalists in this land, and we will look to you as leaders in order to reach our shared goals,” Jackson said. “We have a long way to go to ensure you are partners in our efforts and we will continue to forge a productive relationship with all of you.”

Jackson said she hoped to be able to resolve the proper location of the American Indian office within the agency and reiterated a pledge to hold a summit with tribes in the fall that will focus on improving tribal programs and agency responses to climate change.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan pledged to work closely with NCAI and tribes to ensure the economic stimulus dollars are allocated to building and renovating houses in Indian Country.

“It is incumbent on all of us as partners to demonstrate to the American people that we are investing the money wisely and are creating flourishing economies,” Donovan said. “I commit to you that I am understanding of your needs and will work closely with you as partners to identify the best ways to put our resources to work at HUD, not just in housing but in areas and communities that you work on behalf of everyday.”

Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said he will work to institute and implement the tribal provisions in the farm bill.

“We need to do a better job of reaching out to socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. There has been a significant increase in minority-owned farms specifically Native Americans,” Vilsack said. “Many farms are small; many have to have off-farm income. They are the future because they represent growth.”

Vilsack also pledged to put resources into the U.S. Forest Service to reduce hazardous fuel, he said. Many reservation house acres and acres of forest service land managed by the federal government. “We have not done good job maintaining forest land. There is a real risk of fire. We need to reduce the fuel and do a better job of management.”

White House Intergovernmental Affairs Director Cecilia Munoz said she realizes the front door of the White House hasn’t always been open and welcoming to Native people, but assured the audience that dialogue will be on a government to government basis.

“It’s a time of great promises and extraordinary challenges. You know what works and doesn’t work in your own community. We look forward to working with tribal leaders and NCAI to hear your concerns,” Munoz said. “As for the economic stimulus, we want to be your partners in making the best investments and partners in telling the stories of those investments.”

Jody Gillette, Deputy Director of Intergovernmental Affairs and a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, said she is confident in President Obama’s commitment to Indian Country.

“I will listen to your concerns. You’re not going to have to convince me of what the needs are of Indian Country. I am a part of Indian Country,” Gillette said. “We are already past the introductions. We need to move forward and get some work done.”

“NCAI and Indian Country is committed to working closely with all branches of the federal government in the coming months and years on these important issues discussed here today,” said NCAI Executive Director Jacqueline Johnson Pata. “Whether it is partnering on issues such as climate change with the Department of Energy or border issues with the Department of Homeland Security, tribes will play a crucial role in the agenda moving forward.”