Interior Department’s Latest Transfer to Cobell Education Scholarship Fund Brings Total to Almost $20 Million

Contributions from Land Buy-Back Program will help fund opportunities for American Indian and Alaska Native students

WASHINGTON – As the White House Tribal Youth Gathering commences in Washington, the Department of the Interior today announced that an additional $2 million has been transferred to the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund, bringing the total amount contributed so far to $19.5 million. The Scholarship Fund – funded in part by the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Buy-Back Program) and authorized by the Cobell Settlement – provides financial assistance through scholarships to American Indian and Alaska Native students wishing to pursue post-secondary and graduate education and training.

Providing Native youth with increased access to higher education opportunities supports the Obama Administration’s Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) initiative to remove barriers to Native youth success. Today, in conjunction with the transfer, the White House is hosting its first-ever Tribal Youth Gathering. The summit provides Native youth from across the country the opportunity to interact directly with senior Administration officials and the White House Council on Native American Affairs, chaired by U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell.

“These additional funds for the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund will help put Native youth on the path to pursuing their dreams and achieving their career goals,” said Interior Solicitor Hilary Tompkins, who negotiated the Cobell Settlement on behalf of the Department of the Interior. “The Fund is an important tool to unlock the doors of higher education and assist the next generation of Native American leaders in gaining valuable skills for today’s competitive workforce.”

Interior makes quarterly transfers to the Scholarship Fund as a result of Buy-Back Program sales, up to a total of $60 million. The amount contributed is based on a formula put forth in the Cobell Settlement that sets aside a certain amount of funding depending on the value of the fractionated interests sold. These contributions do not reduce the amount that an owner will receive for voluntarily consolidating their interests.
The Scholarship Fund is administered by the American Indian Graduate Center (AIGC) located in Albuquerque, N.M. A five-member Cobell Board is responsible for the oversight and supervision of the activities of the fund’s administering organization. Applications for scholarships for the 2015/2016 academic year were accepted through June 1, 2015, and are currently being reviewed. The first round of annual scholarship recipients will be notified mid-August. More information about the Cobell Scholarship Program can be found at http://www.aigcs.org/.

“AIGC is pleased to have received more than 2,700 applications as of the June 1 deadline, and we encourage all applicants to continue to send in required tribal documentation and financial needs forms by July 17 for continued eligibility,” said Joan V. Currier, Chief Operating Officer of the AIGC. “This will be a highly competitive awarding process, but we look forward to announcing the first cohort of Cobell Scholars this summer.”

Alex Pearl, Chairman of the Cobell Board of Trustees, added, “We are pleased by the Department of the Interior’s recent transfer of funds as part of a continuing effort to create a perpetual scholarship fund designed to make additional funding for higher education available to Native American youth. The scholarship applications that we have already received for the coming academic year indicate that the need is enormous. Our Board continues to work on growing our fund and building the important relationship with the Cobell Scholarship Program administrator, the American Indian Graduate Center. The Cobell Board is grateful for the leadership demonstrated by Solicitor Hilary Tompkins and looks forward to continue working with her and the Department of the Interior in this unique shared effort to minimize the barriers faced by Native students in accomplishing their educational goals.”

The Buy-Back Program was created to implement the land consolidation component of the Cobell Settlement, which provided $1.9 billion to purchase fractionated interests in trust or restricted land from willing landowners. Consolidated interests are transferred to tribal government ownership for uses benefiting the reservation community and tribal members.

So far, the Buy-Back Program has paid more than $540 million to individual landowners and restored the equivalent of nearly 980,000 acres of land to tribal governments.

Landowners can contact the Trust Beneficiary Call Center at 888-678-6836 to update their contact information, ask questions about their land or purchase offers, and learn about the financial implications of consolidating land. Individuals can also visit their local Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST) or Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) office, or find more information at www.doi.gov/buybackprogram/landowners in order to make informed decisions about their land.

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