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Second tribal meeting announced at NCAI

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By Valerie Taliman, Today correspondent
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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – On the opening day of the National Congress of American Indians convention, the White House announced it will convene the second Tribal Leaders Summit Dec. 16 to help frame priorities that can be accomplished before President Barack Obama's term ends in 2012.

Speaking to a packed house, Kimberly Teehee, White House senior policy advisor for Native American Affairs, told an estimated 2,000 participants that the president is committed to keeping his promises to Indian country.

"You are not the forgotten community," she said. "President Obama honors the nation-to-nation relationship, and is committed to bringing hope and a new era of prosperity. We all know the need exceeds our resources, and we will continue to look to your wisdom and experience to set a policy agenda."

Teehee said the president also supports strengthening tribal colleges, resolving the *Cobell* case, and passing a legislative fix for *Carcieri v. Salazar*, the 2009 U.S. Supreme Court decision that limits Interior's ability to take land into trust for tribes.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, Senate Indian Affairs Committee chairman, who joined the conference via live video stream, assured tribal leadership that he intends to push the *Carcieri* fix in the final weeks of the 111th Congress.

NCAI President Jefferson Keel praised the Obama administration for being a dedicated partner in upholding the trust responsibility between tribes and the federal government.

“This year we’ve witnessed landmark legislation passed to benefit Indian country – the Indian Health Care Improvement Act made permanent, the Tribal Law and Order Act signed into law, the recent settlement of *Keepseagle* with USDA, and increased government-to-government consultations,” he said.

“The result of this outreach and partnership is that we are respected as members of the American family of governments. During the mid-term elections, we firmly stated that the United States’ trust responsibility is a non-partisan issue. We expect that moving forward our partners in all agencies of government will work to ensure the trust responsibility and treaty rights are upheld.”

Later that day, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar gave updates on his efforts to “reform, restructure and rebuild federal relations with Indian country,” through education reforms, revised BIA land-leasing regulations, programs to fight childhood obesity and diabetes, and economic development initiatives.

Salazar also announced support of the White Mountain Apache Tribe’s water settlement, the fourth Indian water rights settlement supported by President Obama. So far, the president has supported nearly \$1 billion of Indian water settlements to resolve long-standing disputes.

“The message from this administration is clear,” Salazar said. “We want to settle Indian water rights disputes and we will support good water settlements that result from negotiations with all stakeholders, and that come with a reasonable federal price tag and good cost share contributions from states and other benefiting parties.”

In his keynote speech on the second day, Kevin Gover, director of the National Museum of the American Indian and former Interior official,

encouraged tribes to increase economic prosperity through the ability to tax and execute excise policy like other governments.

“Tribes are put in an absurd bind. They are encouraged to achieve self-sufficiency but they are deprived of the ability to tax and regulate. States do it, but tribes can’t use tax and regulatory policy for economic development.”

Tribal leaders and policy makers then spent a half-day formulating goals and priorities for the next Congress after breaking into 150 discussion groups focused on land and water issues, treaty rights, self-determination, economic self-sufficiency and health communities.

Protecting federal appropriations to meet the needs of tribal communities will be a high priority for tribal leadership as Congress reconvenes this week.

“We are heading into this lame-duck session with a budget that hasn’t been passed by Congress yet,” said Mellor Willie, National American Indian Housing Council executive director. “It’s going to be a tough session because money is tight, and we need to defend our budgets. With the current financial crisis, they are looking at cutting discretionary spending.”

Likewise, when the new Congress convenes in January with 90 new members, key issues will include funding for tribal health care, infrastructure, energy development and education.

NCAI Executive Director Jacqueline Johnson Pata said the Republican shift in Congress won’t affect efforts to advance the tribal agenda, and she expects bi-partisan input.

“We have a lot of candidates on both sides of the aisle that work for Indian country, and we know that our issues never get passed in Congress without support of one side or another. There are some issues that we have a tougher time with when Democrats are in leadership, and

there are other issues we'll have a tougher time with when Republicans are in leadership."

After Canada moved to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recently, many leaders here questioned when the United States would adopt and implement it. The U.S. is now the only country in the U.N. to oppose the rights of the world's 370 million indigenous peoples.

"Now that Canada has endorsed the Declaration, I believe that President Obama will support our human rights and move to adopt it soon," said Chairman Mel Sheldon of the Tulalip Tribes of Washington. "It's a matter of time, I believe.

"With adoption of the U.N. Declaration will come a higher acknowledgment and greater respect for Indian nations' government-to-government relations with federal, state and local governments. This is really going to be a watershed for us – a huge page in our history is about to turn."