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Interior’s Land Buy-Back Program Adds Locations to its Implementation Schedule and Makes Changes for Final Years

Land consolidation at scheduled locations depends on funds remaining as Program proceeds



WASHINGTON – Today, the Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians announced the addition of five locations to the implementation schedule of the Land Buy-Back Program for Tribal Nations (Program) as well as operational changes for those locations. The expanded schedule and other changes seek to maximize the Program’s impact while also addressing funding and time constraints that will continue to increase in the Program’s final three years.

“As the Buy-Back Program addresses increasingly challenging funding and time constraints in its final years, it is taking steps to ensure to ensure efficient and effective use of the *Cobell* Settlement funds,” said **Principal Deputy Special Trustee Jerry Gidner**. “Tribes and

landowners should know that the Program remains committed to supporting tribal involvement and helping landowners make informed decisions.”

The Buy-Back Program implements the land consolidation component of the 2009 [Cobell v Salazar Settlement](#), which provided a \$1.9 billion Trust Land Consolidation Fund to consolidate fractional interests in trust or restricted land from willing sellers within a 10-year period. The 10-year period is set to expire in November 2022 as specified in the [Claims Resolution Act of 2010](#), the statute Congress passed to ratify and confirm the Settlement. Interests purchased through the Program are immediately transferred in trust to the tribe with jurisdiction over the land. This effort strengthens tribal sovereignty by unifying lands for tribal benefit and use, such as economic development, infrastructure, housing, cultural preservation, and rights-of-way.

As of December 16, 2019, approximately \$255 million of the Fund remains, \$131 million of which is available for land purchases and \$124 million for implementation. With the \$1.6 billion that has been expended, the Program has consolidated over 893,000 fractionated land interests – the equivalent of nearly 2.6 million acres – and restored them to tribal trust ownership. Notably, tribal ownership now exceeds 50% in 17,700 more tracts of land as a result of the Buy-Back Program; this represents an increase of more than 144% for the locations where implementation has occurred. At several locations, the Program has consolidated more than half of the fractional interests that existed in 2013, with one location in Montana achieving a 65% reduction.

In 2017, the Department [announced](#) 20 locations for implementation, noting that the Program would “continually assess progress and may revise the schedule or add locations as capacity and resources allow, depending on the results achieved.” Now, given the likelihood that resources will remain after implementation at those locations, the Program is expanding its schedule with an additional five locations. As with the locations announced in 2017, the additional locations were identified based on a number of factors, including severity of fractionation, appraisal complexity, degree of ownership overlap between locations or geographic proximity, tribal readiness, past response rate, and cost and efficiency. The locations are listed below in alphabetical order (not reflective of the order of implementation):

- Bad River Reservation (Wisconsin)
- Lake Traverse Reservation (North Dakota and South Dakota)
- Spirit Lake Reservation (North Dakota)
- Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation (North Dakota)
- Yakama Reservation (Washington)

While planning and other preliminary implementation activities at these locations are beginning now, the Program’s ability to extend purchase offers for each location will depend on the

availability of funding. And, the Program will continue to prioritize the purchase of cost-effective land at these locations. A Program representative will contact each tribe at the initial stages of planning for implementation. If resources allow, the Program may include additional locations for implementation in the future. Program consolidation results and funding status will continue to be available on the Program's [website](#). At this time, the Program is not requesting submissions of interest for participation.

CHANGES TO MAXIMIZE PROGRAM IMPACT

With the remaining funding and time limits established for the Program, the Program will maintain its focus on consolidating the greatest number of fractionated land interests. For the five locations announced above, the Program will adjust its operations to increase flexibility and maximize Program impact in the remaining three years.

Individuals who own fractional interests at the five newly-announced locations should be aware of several Program changes on the horizon. First, the Program's acceptance of returned offer packages will be contingent on the availability of funding. The approval of offers and subsequent payments to landowners will not be guaranteed. Second, the Program will require additional time to process returned offer packages while it determines the availability of funding, meaning that landowners may wait longer to receive payment for interests they choose to sell.

Additional information about these and other changes will be provided in the coming months through updates to frequently asked questions on the Program's [website](#) and in communications to tribes and landowners.

RESOURCES FOR LANDOWNERS

Various informational tools are available to landowners, who are encouraged to think strategically about their options and carefully consider how to use the funds they receive from selling their land. The Program's website includes detailed [frequently asked questions](#), a schedule of [upcoming outreach events](#), and additional information to help individuals make [informed decisions](#) about their land.

Landowners are encouraged to call the Trust Beneficiary Call Center (Call Center) at **888-678-6836** or visit their local Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians (OST) office to ensure that their address on file is current, ask questions about their land or purchase offers, and request a copy of the appraisal completed for their land.

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