

Indian Country Response to *Cobell* Payments Overwhelmingly Positive

WASHINGTON, Dec. 28. -- The response of Native Americans to the distribution of individual checks settling the long-running *Cobell* lawsuit over the government's mishandling of individual Indian trust accounts and trust lands has been overwhelmingly positive and highly gratifying, lawyers handling the settlement said today.

Approximately 263,500 individuals have been sent their Historical Accounting Class payments. This includes 208,500 checks mailed within a few days of the court's approval on December 12 and 54,950 payments wired to the Treasury Department for deposit into Individual Indian Money accounts. Over two-thirds of checks have been cashed within 10 days of their arrival and over 80% of class members have received their Historical Accounting payments.

That is a level much higher than seen in most class-action settlements, said David Smith, an attorney with Kilpatrick Townsend, the law firm representing the class members.

Jennifer Keough of the Garden City Group Inc. (GCG), the court-appointed claims administrator handling the distribution, confirmed that view "In our experience this is an extraordinarily high percentage of awards received and cashed in a very short time," she said.

A call center, handling inquiries from Native Americans about the payments has received 425,000 calls in the past 10 days, Smith said.

That's about 50,000 calls a day, a huge volume considering that about 329,000 individuals were believed in the Historical Accounting class and about 500,000 in the total settlement group, Smith said.

In order to help more individuals to resolve their questions, the call centers hours of operation have been expanded into the evening, Ms. Keough said.

The response of class members has been overwhelming positive with many calling the center to update their contact information, she said.

"GCG has added operators to help handle the call volume and they are determined to see that all remaining checks get into the beneficiaries' hands as quickly as possible," she said.

"We are heartened and gratified that there is such strong interest in Indian Country in the Cobell settlement," Smith said.

"The addresses we are using were supplied to us by the Department of Interior," he said. "As we learned during the 16 years that this case was in the courts, not all of Interior's account information was accurate."

"However, beneficiaries who did not receive checks have contacted us providing accurate contact information, and Indian Country can be assured that we are doing everything we can to expedite the mailing and, when necessary, the forwarding of checks to the correct addresses," Smith said. An additional 16,500 checks will be delivered in the next few days to updated addresses recently received.

Any checks sent to a deceased individual should be returned for a new check that will be sent to that individual's estate so it can go directly to the heirs, he said.

The strong call volume and the cashing of the checks show that Indian Country was overwhelmingly supportive of the settlement, Smith said.

The *Cobell* lawsuit was filed in 1996 by Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Nation, over the federal government's handling of individual Indian money accounts. Ms. Cobell died last year before the settlement checks could be delivered to the estimated 500,000 account holders.

For additional information, individuals should visit the *Cobell* website: www.cobellsettlement.com. The toll free information number is 1-800-961-6109. Questions may also be e-mailed to Info@IndianTrust.com. The mailing address is: Indian Trust Settlement, P.O. Box 9577 Dublin, OH 43017-4877.

Media may call Bill McAllister 202-257-5385

###