

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**NATIVE AMERICAN LEADERS JOIN TO DELIVER
TRUST REFORM AND COBELL SETTLEMENT PRINCIPLES TO CONGRESS**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – June 20, 2005 – Today, in an historic union prominent Native American leaders joined with the lead plaintiff, Elouise Cobell, in the landmark *Cobell v. Norton* case, to present the Trust Reform and *Cobell* Settlement Workgroup Principles as the basis of legislation that would resolve the nine-year court battle over the federal government's admitted failure to account for trust funds held for Native Americans and reform the national trust management system that continues to plague Indian tribes and individuals who own cattle, timber, crops, oil & gas, and other resources. The trust funds belong to an estimated 500,000 individual Indians – monies that the government received for the proceeds from sales and leases of resources from the Indians' lands. The Principles also set out a number of standards and principles for tribal and individual trust management.

Tex G. Hall ("Red Tipped Arrow"), president of The National Congress of American Indians and chairman of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation and Jim Gray, chairman of the Inter-Tribal Monitoring Association, and principal chief of the Osage Nation along with Elouise Cobell, formed and led a national working group comprised of national native leaders, organizations, and individuals who collectively drafted the Principles. In addition to Hall, Gray, and Cobell, other Native American advocates such as Sharon Clahchischilliage, executive director of the Washington, D.C. office of the Navajo Nation and John Echohawk, executive director of the Native American Rights Fund, joined with them today to announce that Indian Country stands in unity behind the Principles.

All are in strong support of an effort by Congress to write legislation following the Principles roadmap that would put in place reforms to the deeply troubled management of Indian land, resources, and monies and also settle the *Cobell v. Norton* class action litigation. The Principles

demand needed accountability, enforceable legal standards, and fairness from the government in exchange for ending the historic court battle.

The Principles were drafted in response to a request by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND), vice chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, Rep. Richard Pombo (R-CA), chairman of the House Resources Committee, and Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV), ranking member of the House Resources Committee who approached the tribal leaders seeking a permanent solution to the trust scandal. The lawmakers asked Indian Country to speak with a unified voice and provide a set of principles that would guide the lawmakers' drafting of legislation to provide for a prompt and fair resolution of the trust issue. In the process, Native American leaders were careful to seek out the advice of Congressional staff of both Committees. They will transmit the Principles to Senators McCain and Dorgan, and Representatives Pombo and Rahall today.

“The courts, Congress, even the Dept. of Interior’s own inspector general have found that the government has mismanaged the individual Indian trusts for over a century, breached its duty, permitted rampant fraud, and never accounted for the monies in the trust,” said Cobell. “For decades, Indians have suffered at the hands of federal bureaucrats and policies of delay, obfuscation, and outright misrepresentation, as repeated judicial decisions have found. Those policies have placed substantial additional costs on the American taxpayer. These Principles reflect our long, difficult struggle for justice, justice that Congress would not tolerate being denied to any other Americans. The fact that the Courts have repeatedly said what the government did with our money – our money – is wrong and must be corrected is reflected in these Principles. We welcome the efforts of Congress to see justice done at long last. Make no mistake, I intend to continue to aggressively pursue justice until this matter can be resolved in a manner that is fair to the many Indian people whose land and money were misused by the federal government.”

“The federal government’s mismanagement of the Indian trust system for the past 125 years has brought tremendous damage and loss to Native American tribes and individuals across the United States,” said president Hall. “This national injustice has today resulted in a historic union

of Indian nations across the country and individual Indian allottee organizations, who are rallying together behind these Principles which stand for fairness, accountability, restitution, and honesty. Our friends in Congress challenged all of Indian Country to help draft a roadmap to justice, and we are proud to say, we have answered that call.”

“Never before have we seen this level of cooperation among tribes, Indian groups, and individual Indian trust beneficiaries,” said Chief Gray. “The Principles represent a clear breakthrough, and reflect the importance of our working with Congress to bring a long overdue, fair, and just resolution to trust reform and accounting.”

“For thousands of individual Indians, including many members of the Navajo Nation, that are owed monies from the sales and leases of resources on their lands, a fair accounting and settlement of the trust funds, and reform of the trust system with tribal consultation, will make a meaningful difference in their lives,” said Clahchischilliage.

“The longer trust reform and accounting remain unresolved, the more it will cost and the more difficult it becomes to fix,” said Echohawk. “The Principles outline a practical and equitable solution to account for the missing disbursements, and to create accurate records and accountings going forward.”

The text of the Principles is available at:

www.indiantrust.com/pdfs/20050620SettlementPrinciples.pdf.

Additional information on the *Cobell* litigation is available at www.indiantrust.com; the National Congress of American Indians at www.ncai.org; the Inter-Tribal Monitoring Association at www.itmatrustfunds.org; the Navajo Nation at www.navajo.org; and the Native American Rights Fund at www.narf.org.

About *Cobell v. Norton*

Filed in 1996, the *Cobell v. Norton* lawsuit has secured landmark victories for individual Indian trust account holders. In a 1999 ruling, U.S. District Court Judge Royce Lamberth held that the

government had breached its trust responsibility to the Indians and owed them a full accounting for funds the government was supposed to have held for them. That decision, upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, is still pending before Lamberth who is overseeing the government's efforts to reform the trust and make the promised accounting. He is currently holding a hearing into the security of Interior Department computers that hold trust data. The judge has said that the government's handling of the trust accounts set "the gold standard for mismanagement of a government agency." He has held three Cabinet officers and two Assistant Interior Secretaries in contempt of court over the issue.

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