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US government settles century long dispute with American Indian nations

The United States government said it has settled a long-running lawsuit against the Department of the Interior for mismanagement of trust fund accounts held by hundreds of thousands of Native Americans.



Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Indian tribe and lead plaintiff in the suit

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The settlement ends a 13-year legal battle to resolve a dispute that dates back to the late-1800s. The legal settlement will cost the US government 3.4 billion US dollars.

The agreement ends the case brought by Native American tribes charging that the Interior Department had swindled hundreds of thousands of Indians out of royalties for leasing their lands to mining, timber and energy interests.

Announcement of the settlement came at a news conference here in Washington by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who said it was time for the government to “right a past wrong”.

“It is a historic day for the United States of America. It is a historic day for the first Americans of these United States,” he said.

Tex G. Hall, president of the National Congress of American Indians at a news conference in Washington announced Native American leaders have joined with Elouise Cobell in the Trust Reform and Cobell Settlement Workgroup

Under the terms of the agreement, more than 1.4 billion USD will be distributed to more than 300,000 Native Americans to compensate them for royalty claims. Another 2 billion will be used to buy back and consolidate tribal lands lost by previous generations.

The lead plaintiff in the suit filed in 1996 is Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Indian tribe in the western state of Montana. Cobell told the news conference that even though some plaintiffs wanted to hold out for more money from the government, it was time to bring the dispute to an end.

“Yes, we could prolong our struggle and fight longer. But we are compelled to settle now by the sobering realization that our class [the number of plaintiffs] grows smaller each year, each month, and every day as our elders die and are forever prevented from receiving their just compensation,” she said.

Cobell also said there was growing pressure to reach a settlement because so many Native Americans live in poverty.

“We also face the uncomfortable, but unavoidable, fact that a large number of our individual Indian money account holders currently exist in poverty,” she said. “And the settlement can begin to address that extreme situation and provide some hope and a better quality of life for their remaining years,” Cobell said.

The case dates back to 1887, when the government carved up Indian reservation lands into smaller parcels and allotted them to individual Indians.

It has been the Interior Department's responsibility to manage various activities on the land, including mineral mining, oil and gas drilling, and timber harvesting, and then pay the Indians royalties for those activities. But Cobell and the other plaintiffs charged that the Interior Department had mishandled the revenues for more than a century.

President Barack Obama issued a statement hailing the agreement as an important step toward reconciliation between Indian trust beneficiaries and the federal government. The agreement still must be approved by a federal court and by Congress, which must vote to allocate the money needed to fund the settlement

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