

Secretary USDOJ convenes White House Interagency Group on Insular Affairs; U.S. Island Governors and Delegates Discuss Priorities

Washington, D.C. (February 24, 2009) - Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar today told U.S. island leaders he will promote a more active and effective working relationship with them through the White House Interagency Group on Insular Affairs.

"We plan to use the Interagency Group as the means for extensive consultation with the island Governors and Members of Congress to coordinate significant decisions, and to advocate a collaborative approach to the Federal Government's responsibilities to insular areas," Salazar said. "We will promote a vision for the Department of the Interior that moves beyond the traditional western focus and reaches all the people of America, including the insular areas – a vision for the Department of America."

Salazar said he would work with island leaders to ensure the Interagency Group is working effectively with the best organizational structure.

More than 80 representatives from the four U.S. island territories and federal agencies attended the plenary session of the Interagency Group, which was established to coordinate federal assistance and activities in the insular areas.

The meeting at Interior Headquarters was moderated by Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs Nikolao I. Pula. Accompanying the Secretary were David Hayes, the Department's nominee for Deputy Secretary; Thomas Strickland, the Secretary's Chief of Staff; and Pam Haze, the Acting Assistant Secretary for Policy, Management and Budget.

The Secretary also discussed President Obama's commitment to transparency and accountability for investments in the islands from the economic recovery plan. Under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the island territories receive funding through formula and competitive grants from a host of Federal departments and agencies.

"These investments will help strengthen island communities' economies," Salazar said. "Working through the Interagency Group together we can significantly improve the coordination of efforts that are getting underway as part of the Recovery Act. I call on the Governors and Members of Congress to help me ensure that we implement these programs in a manner that fulfills President Obama's vision for accountability and responsibility in government."

Major issues before the Interagency Group include coordinating with the Department of Defense on the relocation of U.S. military forces from Okinawa to Guam; a request for an extension beyond the June 1, 2009 for federalization of immigration in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands; health care in the Insular Areas; and the minimum wage law's impact in the islands.

The Governors and Delegates each submitted a list of their priority concerns for 2009, which are posted on the Office of Insular Affairs website at www.doi.gov/oia.

The major issues include: economic development, minimum wage policy, the planned military expansion on Guam, rum excise tax levels, visa issues, infrastructure financing and local Veterans Affairs services in the Northern Mariana Islands. Staff from the Office of Insular Affairs will be following up with federal agencies to address these priorities.

Participants included Gov. Togiola Tulafono of American Samoa; Gov. Felix Camacho of Guam; Gov. Benigno Fitial of the Northern Mariana Islands; Gov. John deJongh of the U.S. Virgin Islands; Congressman Eni Faleomavaega of American Samoa; Congresswoman Donna Christensen of the U.S. Virgin Islands; Congresswoman Madeleine Bordallo of Guam; and the newest Member of Congress, Congressman Gregorio Camacho Sablan of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Federal agency participants included Glyn Davies, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Affairs; Richard Barth, Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for Policy; BJ Penn, Assistant Secretary of Navy for Installations and Environment; Nikki Bratcher-Bowman, Acting Director for Intergovernmental Affairs of Health and Human Services; and Peter Dougherty, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Veterans' Affairs for Intergovernmental Affairs.

In addition to the partners from over fifteen federal agencies, representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Trade Representative's Office and the White House also attended the plenary session.

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