

Buy-Back Program Testimony to the Senate Committee of Indian Affairs

December 7, 2016

Introduction

Oki Tsa nii tahpii; (Hello How are You)

Recognize: Our Pikunii Woman Warrior; Yellow Bird Woman The late Elouise Cobell,

The Land Buy-Back Program, currently in the Post-offer phase on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana.

- 1. The initial point of concern is that both the Department and Tribe agree that pre-program individual Financial Literacy training and education was critical.**
- 2. The Department and Tribe recognize that 45 days is a very short time for individual offers and implement such an important program.**
- 3. The recommendation is to continue the current program with corresponding funding beyond the agreed upon term, for tribal members that will inherit land in the future.**

A. Program Benefits (non-contiguous track appraisal): The Blackfeet Tribe will be the last Tribe in Montana to implement in the Buy-Back Program, we have benefitted from lessons learned from other respective tribal Nations challenges. For example, the Blackfeet Tribe has a substantial amount of tracts that are non-contiguous. **A notable benefit to the Blackfeet has been the appraisal of non-contiguous tracks that were otherwise not being appraised during prior implementation of the Buy-Back Program.**

B. Financial Literacy Education: Another benefit to the Tribe has been the Department's willingness to change its policy regarding financial literacy education. The Buy-Back Program has created a potential economic benefit to our tribal members, on a reservation with a significantly high unemployment rate.

However, poverty is directly correlated with education, or the lack of. Many individuals receiving offers, some significant, will lack the financial literacy needed to efficiently manage their new fortune, should they accept. When drafting the Cooperative Agreement, the Tribe included a line item for voluntary financial literacy training to land owners. The Department denied the Tribe's request. **Although the Tribe's Cooperative Agreement didn't allow a financial education component, the Tribe met with various financial entities in an attempt to provide financial literacy training outside the Cooperative Agreement. The Tribe was successful with**

partnering with various entities and the “Pikuni Money” campaign was formed, with a mission of providing financial literacy training to eligible land owners. Eventually the Tribe was able to negotiate with the Department and an agreement was made to amend the Cooperative Agreement which would fund a portion of the Pikuni Money campaign as well as extending the length of the Cooperative Agreement. The Tribe appreciates the Department’s effort in amending the Agreement. The Tribe is aware that individuals will receive offers in the 6-7 figure range. The Tribe is fully briefed on the unfortunate events that occurred on other reservations, to similarly situated individuals. The Tribe wants to be in a position to better prepare its people for the aftermath of the Buy-Back Program. The Tribe is very optimistic that the financial education component of the Cooperative Agreement will greatly benefit the people who participate.

Potential consequences of the Buy Back Program include:

Length to Accept Offer: The length of time that an offer has to be accepted. **This is a once in a life time event throughout Indian Country. Deciding on whether or not to sell your land is a major decision.** Because the offer monies have already been allocated by the Department, and the appraisals valid for nine (9) months, it would be in the best interests of the eligible land owners if the offer period could be extended past the 45 days.

Cooperative Agreement: The Cooperative Agreement, Outreach and Post Outreach Process’ need to be revisited. **The Buy-Back Program is the first of its kind. Many of the components needed to make the Program work, were forged from scratch. The Tribe had no road map to follow when creating its Cooperative Agreement. There was a lack of cooperation on behalf of the Department to assist the Tribe with creating the Agreement.** For example, the Tribe asked for assistance with regards to equipment: “how much paper, pens and other supplies should the Tribe contemplate using?” The Tribe also requested copies of other Cooperative Agreements from other tribes who had already participated in the Program. The Department denied the Tribe’s requests. This was unfortunate because the Tribe on its own volition was able to reach out to other tribes, and gain valuable insight and information that the Tribe was able to incorporate into its Cooperative Agreement.

Cookie Cutter mentality: The Tribe disagrees with the Department’s “cookie-cutter” mentality towards the Tribe throughout Buy-Back Program. The Department based its decisions to allow or not to allow the Tribe to perform certain

tasks based on what occurred on other reservations during the Buy-Back Program. The Department's approach is that if something was not successful at tribe A, then it wouldn't be successful at Blackfeet, and vice versa. **The Tribe has had to remind the Department that the Blackfeet and each respective tribal nation are different and must be treated as such.**

Thank you...