Echo Hawk Announces Signing Ceremony with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation

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Assistant Secretary - Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today was joined by the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees, tribal leaders from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation and the Flathead Joint Board of Control to announce a unique and historic agreement.

"I want to commend everyone who played a role in bringing the two sides together for this historic occasion." Echo Hawk said. "While we will continue to own the Project, we believe the Cooperative Management Entity established through this agreement will do an excellent job operating this important project that has such a significant role in the economy of the Flathead Reservation and surround communities."

After decades of litigation and disagreements the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) of the Flathead Reservation, the Flathead Joint Board of Control (JBC) and the Department of Interior today signed a historic agreement regarding the future management and operation of the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project (FIIP), of land on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The agreement provides for transfer of operations and management to the CSKT and JBC. The JBC is the state-chartered entity that represents the Flathead, Missoula and Jocko Valley Irrigation Districts that operate of fee land within the Flathead Indian Reservation. The effective date of the transfer will be April 9, 2010.

"This is truly a historic agreement that we are signing today with our non-Indian neighbors. I am glad we decided a few years ago to resolve our differences through negotiation," said Tribal Chairman Bud Moran. "I have every confidence that the cooperative entity we have created will continue to do a good job running this project while protecting the Tribes' interest and those who irrigate lands to make a living.

The CSKT and the JBC have created the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project Cooperative Management Entity (CME). The CME will have an equal number of representatives on it from the CSKT and the JBC. The CME will take over all aspects of operation and management of FIIP, including staffing and fee collection, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Department of the Interior). The project itself, including rights of way and real property will remain a federal project. FIIP facilities include 17 major storage reservoirs, 1,300 miles of canals and laterals and more than 10,000 structures.

In 1904 Congress enacted the Flathead Allotment Act which allotted the Flathead Indian Reservation into individually owned or family owned parcels. Congressional amendments to that Act in 1908 authorized the construction of the FIIP and directed the transfer of the management and operation of the FIIP to the owners of the lands irrigated by the project when certain conditions and repayment of the debt of construction had been met. In 1948 Congress again amended the Act authorizing net power revenues from the electrical utility on the reservation to be dedicated to paying off the debt of construction over the following half-century. That debt has since been paid and the "transfer" provision has been triggered.

"I want to say how pleased I am that we are signing this agreement. After years of disagreeing we have successfully negotiated an accord that will protect the interests of all parties involved. Both parties can be proud of the good working relationship and trust we developed in the process of negotiating this agreement," said JBC Chairman Walt Schock.

This agreement recognizes both the interests of the CSKT and JBC and creates a partnership that has never before been undertaken at an irrigation project owned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs has responsibility for helping the Secretary of the Interior to fulfill his trust responsibilities to tribal and individual trust beneficiaries and promoting self-determination and self-governance for the nation's 564 federally recognized American Indian and Alaskan Native tribes. The Assistant Secretary oversees the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which administers one of two federal school systems.

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Historic Flathead Irrigation Agreement Creates Cooperative to Manage Reservoirs, Canals

By: Vince Devlin of the Missoulian

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"It's one of the more rewarding things I've been involved with in my life," said Alan Mikkelson, a consultant for the Joint Board of Control. "The two sides established very positive relationships, close personal and working relationships in the process."

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Wednesday's agreement - which takes effect Friday – recognizes the interests of both sides according to both groups, and has been seven years in the works.

"We actually had an agreement in principal within four to six months of the start of negotiations" back in March of 2003, Mikkelson said. "It took 6 ½ years to do the technical work, the engineering and environmental studies, and hammer out the details."