

Obama signs bill to expedite tribal development

The Associated Press

President Barack Obama on Monday signed a bill designed to expedite home building and energy development on tribal lands.

The law, sponsored by Rep. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., enables tribes to approve trust land leases directly, rather than waiting for approval from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Navajo Nation already has that authority.

The so-called HEARTH Act is expected to open the door to badly needed housing development on reservations, as well as wind and solar energy projects that tribes have been eager to launch.

Land on American Indian reservations cannot be bought and sold because it is held in trust by the federal government. Previously, if a tribe or tribe member wanted to build a house or business, the Interior Department had to approve a "lease" of the land or mortgages. That process sometimes took years.

"Tribal communities should be able to make their own decisions about how to use their own land, and the HEARTH Act will give them the freedom to do so," Heinrich said in a statement. "The last thing the federal government should do is stand in the way of a family who wants to buy a home, and this bill will help make it easier for Native families to buy and build houses in the communities where their families have lived for generations."

Heinrich said the law will bring much-needed housing and businesses to Indian Country.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the legislation underscores Obama's commitment to empower Indian nations and strengthen their economies.

"This legislation complements the work we are doing at Interior to undertake the most comprehensive reforms of Indian land leasing regulations in more than 50 years," he said in a statement. "These parallel efforts will have a real impact for individuals and families who want to own a home or build a business — generating investment, new jobs and revenues."

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