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Interior Secretary Norton Encourages Cooperative Approach Towards Environmental Decision-Making

MARICOPA COUNTY, Ariz. –U.S. Interior Secretary Gale Norton addressed more than 2,500 delegates to the National Association of Counties (NACo) Annual Conference in Maricopa County, Arizona on Sunday. The Secretary stressed the importance of collaborative efforts between federal, state and local officials in land use planning and environmental decision-making.

“So much success can occur when local people and local knowledge are involved,” Secretary Norton said.

Along those lines, the Secretary indicated that the Administration will publish proposed rules on Tuesday, which would require the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to invite counties to participate in its planning process as cooperating agencies. The proposed regulations will ensure that the plans incorporate local knowledge of economic, social and political conditions and addresses local interests and values.

“County governments deserve to be at the table when policies are being made that directly affect their citizens and their communities. Western counties will make good use of cooperating agency status to shape BLM policy in positive ways,” Donna Ruffing, President of NACo’s Western Interstate Region (WIR) and Niobrara County, Wyo. Commissioner said.

Secretary Norton noted that other Department of Interior agencies will examine how they can strengthen the role of counties.

“We are excited that Secretary Norton indicated her desire that this be only a first step and look forward to the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA Forest Service and other federal agencies coming forward with similar proposals,” Sherry Krulitz, Chair of NACo’s Public Lands Steering Committee and Shoshone County, Idaho Commissioner said.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is a full-service organization that provides legislative, research, technical and public affairs assistance to county governments. Created in 1935, NACo continues to ensure that the nation’s 3,066 counties are heard and understood in the White House and Congress.

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