



Indian Country Comes Together to Discuss Critical Issues at NIGA Legislative Summit

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

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On July 25th, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (SCIA) released a discussion draft bill on Internet gaming titled, the "Tribal Online Gaming Act of 2012." The draft was publicly announced to tribal leaders gathered at the National Indian Gaming Association's Summer Legislative Summit in Washington, D.C., at the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs hearing room. More than 260 tribal leaders and their representatives attended the legislative summit.

The first day of the summit was held in the beautiful National Museum of the American Indian in the Rasmuson Theater. The power and symbolism of this building, located on the steps of the Capitol, was an appropriate setting for tribal leaders to discuss the variety of issues facing our communities. The issues discussed during the summit included: the discriminatory audits of tribal governments by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), threats to the restoration of tribal homelands by recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and the push from Indian Country to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to restore tribal authority to investigate and prosecute non-Indian crimes of domestic and dating violence. However, the focus of the summit was targeted on the prospect of federal legislation to legalize Internet gaming in the United States. As a result, the release of the Committee's discussion draft was timely, but it is not without concerns.

NIGA recognizes that the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs (SCIA) worked diligently to develop the draft tribal Internet gaming bill. While it seems that attempts were made to conform the draft bill to the principles set forth in the resolutions unanimously adopted by NIGA and NCAI, Indian Country was not consulted on the details of this discussion draft. Indian Country welcomes the opportunity to analyze the bill and we have already begun outreach to our tribal leadership. NIGA will work with our member tribes, regional organizations, and with the committee and Congress as a whole to correct any provisions that do not provide full faith and credit to tribal government institutions.

The debate on Internet gaming is of great importance to all tribal governments. Indian tribes in 26 states from across a wide section of Indian Country use gaming revenues to rebuild community infrastructure, educate Native children, improve health care for our elders, enhance public safety, and much more.

Also that week, the SCIA hosted an oversight hearing on "Regulation of Tribal Gaming: From Brick & Mortar to the Internet," in which tribal leaders and other officials provided testimony on this hot topic.

The Committee draft acknowledges the important economic contributions that Indian gaming provides to this country. Indian gaming has created 628,000 jobs for Indians and local communities, and our industry comprises 40 percent of all gaming in the United States. Indian gaming alone is responsible for more than \$29 billion in U.S. wages annually. Indian gaming revenues have also saved thousands of American jobs outside of Indian Country, preventing layoffs of teachers, health care workers, fire fighters, police officers, and many other local government employees that provide essential services to children, elders, and others in the community.

Since 2001, NIGA has been actively engaged in the Internet gaming discussion. As the debate over Internet gaming intensified, the NIGA Executive Committee formed the Internet gaming and economic development sub-committee in 2010. To date, this sub-committee has met over a dozen times and its work resulted in the unanimous position adopted by our 184 member tribes in August 2011. These principles are directives from our tribal leadership.

As Chairman, I have always made it clear that NIGA will not waver from our mission, which is to protect tribal sovereignty and the rights of all tribes to shape their economic future.

NIGA will now take the document to our member tribes and nationwide tribal leadership. The discussion draft will be the topic of NIGA's upcoming meeting in conjunction with the Minnesota Indian Gaming Association on the Shakopee Reservation on August 21st. We will further examine the issue during the NIGA Midyear Conference September 18-19th, hosted by the Seminole Tribe in Hollywood, Florida. The NIGA Internet Gaming Sub-committee will also meet at NCAI's Annual Conference the week of October 22nd in Sacramento, California. We hope to see you at these discussions. ♣

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