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Interior Secretary Sally Jewell Issues Statement on Upcoming French Auction of Tribal Sacred Objects

WASHINGTON - Next week, a Paris auction house will hold a sale which includes American Indian tribal sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony. Last December, U.S. Interior Secretary Sally Jewell met with France's former Minister of Justice to seek cooperation in working to repatriate these sacred objects to Indian tribes in the United States. Jewell issued the following statement today:

"Auctioning off tribal sacred objects is extremely troubling not only because tribal law precludes the sale of these objects by individuals, but because items held by a dealer or collector are likely the results of wrongful transfer and may be for sale illegally.

"The United States and France both take great pride in our cultural heritage. Indeed, one of the great landmarks my Department cares for -- the Statue of Liberty -- came to our country as a gift from the people of France. In this spirit, I call upon the French government to work with the United States government and with tribes to find a path toward repatriating these cultural items which are at the heart of Native American heritage and identity."

Under tribal customary law, sacred objects and objects of cultural patrimony are owned by the tribe as a whole. They must be treated with special care by people who are authorized to do so.

In light of recurring auction house sales, Secretary Jewell instructed Interior Department staff to cooperate with tribes and other federal agencies, including the Departments of State and Justice, to review the circumstances by which sacred objects and other important tribal patrimony are making their way into foreign markets. She also called for strengthening current laws to provide more ability to monitor and prevent exports of wrongfully acquired tribal cultural property.