

Gregory Pyle, Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
Oklahoma Indian Issues: Proposed Regulations Governing Economic Development
Wednesday, February 20, 2008 at 8:30 a.m.

I am Gregory Pyle, Chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and thank the House Natural Resources Committee for organizing this event. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was passed by Congress in 1988 to allow Tribes to offer gaming activities and become more self-sufficient and economically viable. Over the past twenty years, the Choctaw Nation has offered gaming, having a major impact on our Nation, tribal members, tourism and the local and state economy. Our polls show that 80% of our customers come from out of state.

Today, our gaming facilities provide more than 3,000 jobs and have an annual payroll of more than \$44 million. This is in areas that have some of the lowest per capita income not only in the state of Oklahoma but in the United States.

This year, we have budgeted \$7 million of tribal funds to contract health so that our Choctaw people can seek specialized health care not available in our facilities. A good example of this is Reese Sherrill, a young Choctaw man who needed a liver transplant about two years ago. Mr. Sherrill's health insurance was limited on the amount it would pay for the transplant. He needed \$50,000 just to be put on the waiting list and his health was deteriorating fast. The Choctaw Nation put up the \$50,000 and paid over \$200,000 for the transplant. Today, Mr. Sherrill is alive and well and can enjoy life with his wife and two children. Mrs. Sherrill is not a widow and their two small children have a father because gaming provided the funds for the Choctaw Nation to help him.

Federal programs have been supplemented this year with an additional \$11.5 million. These programs include our school at Jones Academy, Headstarts, LIHEAP, Homebuyers Advantage, Food Distribution, and many other worthy programs.

The Choctaw Nation budgets at least \$23 million annually for tribally funded programs. This year that amount included \$6 million for Higher Education, \$2 million for the Summer Youth Program, \$3.5 million in other education related programs including Language, Adult Education and a new program called STAR Education Incentive. The STAR Program gives incentives to Choctaw students for making A's and B's or having perfect attendance. We have also budgeted \$5 million for Community Services, and \$3.8 million for a new program called Career Development. The Career Development Program provides career counseling and helps Choctaw people improve the skills necessary for success in college-level or technical courses.

Now let's talk about the economic impact we have on the general population and economy. The Choctaw Nation has partnered with local communities to upgrade water and sewer systems and build emergency response centers. In 2007, we paid vendors in 57 counties in Oklahoma a total of \$25 million. We bus thousands of people to our casinos who stay in local hotels and eat in local restaurants. With the help of gaming

dollars, we have been able to start new businesses and we currently employ 8,000 people with a total annual payroll of \$182 million.

The Choctaw Nation plans to spend \$465 million in the next three years on construction projects in some of the most economically strapped areas of the United States. Just imagine the impact that will have on the employment rate, federal and state taxes and the amount of money that will be spent with local contractors and vendors.

In order to maintain this level of tribal sufficiency and continue to have this huge economic impact, we must continue to have gaming in Oklahoma. Every tribal dollar spent on social services, education and health care means one less dollar that the State of Oklahoma or Federal Government will have to spend. Even though we have a compact with the State, Tribes should still have the option of offering Class II games. That's where we started and our customers still enjoy them. If the restrictions proposed by the NIGC are implemented and a new Class II game must be developed that costs more to manufacture and that is not attractive to our customers, Class II games will no longer be economically viable. Not only will this harm our ability to serve as a positive presence in our communities, but it will also drastically impact our future bargaining power with the state when our compact expires. Both of these far-reaching impacts—as well as others—are verified within the NIGC's own economic impact study.

Our Choctaw vision statement is “To achieve healthy, successful, productive, and self-sufficient lifestyles for a proud Nation of Choctaws”. Gaming is the catalyst that helps us achieve this vision. The impact of gaming and tribal nations is also the catalyst that is helping Oklahoma to grow and move forward. If we take a step back, the results could negatively impact thousands of people and be devastating to our progress.

Thank you