



SOUTHERN UTE INDIAN TRIBE

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Southern Ute Indian Tribe Celebrates Historic Signing of Tribal Energy Resource Agreement



Southern Ute Indian Reservation - The Southern Ute Indian Tribe (Tribe) has reached an historic milestone by becoming the first Tribe to sign a Tribal Energy Resource Agreement (TERA) with the U.S. Department of the Interior. Chairman Melvin J. Baker, Vice Chairman Marvin Pinnecoose, Council Members Andrew Gallegos and Marty Pinnecoose, legal representatives including Tom Shipp and David C. Smith, Bureau of Indian Affairs Southern Ute Agency Superintendent, and members of the Growth Fund leadership joined Secretary of the

Interior Doug Burgum and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Billy Kirkland III this afternoon in Washington D.C., for a signing ceremony at the Department of Interior headquarters. The agreement marks a significant advancement in Tribal self-determination and formally recognizes the Tribe's longstanding expertise in managing its own energy and mineral resources.

Under the agreement, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, through its Department of Energy (DOE), may exercise its sovereign authority to approve energy- and mineral-related leases, agreements, and rights-of-way on Tribal trust lands. Such approvals were historically administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as an extension of federal trust responsibility. The agreement applies to energy and mineral resources located within the exterior boundaries of the Reservation held in trust by the United States for the Tribe.





“This agreement reflects decades of strategic institution-building, responsible energy development, and environmental stewardship,” said **Melvin J. Baker, Chairman of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe**. “TERA formalizes what the Tribe has proven for generations—that we have the expertise and the governance systems to manage our resources responsibly while advancing the well-being of our Tribal Members and safeguarding our land, water, and culture.”

The Tribe has a long-established history in energy development and environmental management and is widely recognized as a leader across Indian Country. Mineral leasing on the Reservation dates to 1949, and in 1980 the Tribe established its Energy Resource Division—now the Department of Energy (DOE), which currently operates under the Growth Fund. Since then, the Tribe has overseen severance tax collection, royalty auditing in coordination with the U.S. Department of the Interior, environmental review, and compliance across thousands of energy-related facilities.

“The Southern Ute Indian Tribe has spent decades building the expertise and governance systems necessary to responsibly manage its own energy resources, and this agreement formally recognizes that leadership,” said **Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum**. “Under the current Administration’s commitment to American energy strength, the Department is proud to partner with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe as the first Tribe in the nation to sign a Tribal Energy Resource Agreement, setting a strong example for Indian Country and the future of American energy development.”

“Process certainty is essential,” said **Kourtney Hadrick, Operating Director for the Southern Ute Growth Fund**. “We appreciate the Department of Interior’s clarity on inherent federal functions and the TERA process. A clear, transparent, and predictable framework is critical for Tribes evaluating whether a TERA is feasible, particularly given the significant investment of staff time and resources required. A TERA places decisions with Tribes, allowing them to act in the best interests of their people without being subject to shifting federal priorities.”

As part of its readiness for TERA, the Tribe has adopted and implemented strong governance frameworks, including a Tribal Leasing Code and Tribal Environmental Review Policy Code. These policies ensure that proposed projects undergo thorough environmental and cultural review, incorporates Tribal Member input, and reflects the Tribe’s priorities before approval.

The Tribe’s Department of Energy plays a critical role in upholding these standards by conducting inspections, compliance verification, revenue auditing, and enforcement to ensure that development on the Reservation is responsible, transparent, and consistent with Tribal Code. Since 2017, the Department has conducted approximately 3,000 inspections reinforcing environmental protection and operational integrity.

“This milestone goes far beyond a single agreement,” said **Shane Seibel, Executive Director of the Southern Ute Growth Fund**. “It shows that when Tribes invest in expertise and are given clear, predictable authority, they can successfully govern complex energy development. We hope this sets a meaningful precedent and expands opportunities for other Tribes to pursue energy sovereignty in ways that align with their own priorities.”

The signing of the TERA marks a nationally significant milestone, affirming the capability and authority of Tribes to lead their own energy development and shape their economic and environmental futures. By removing layers of federal oversight and placing decision-making directly in Tribal hands, this agreement strengthens self-determination, protects land and culture, and ensures development benefits Tribal Members. It also honors the vision of Chairman Leonard C. Burch, whose leadership challenged the status quo and proved the Tribe could chart its own path. Above all, this achievement stands as a model for Indian Country, demonstrating that with strong institutions, sound policies, and long-term vision, Tribal governments can successfully assert greater control over energy development while safeguarding what matters most to their people.

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