



## **Eagle feather group meets with U.S. government**

The Native American Rights Fund established a working group of Indian organizations and tribal leaders to address government intervention in the lives of Native people who work with or use eagle feathers in traditional ways. Since time-immemorial, the eagle and other raptor birds have been an integral part and intrinsic to the traditions, culture and religion of many tribes, pre-dating U.S. colonization. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife (FWS) and other federal law enforcement agencies have been conducting raids, confiscations and interrogations on many Indian reservations and Pow-wow events, in at least 14 states of the western United States under what purportedly is referred to as an "Eagle Feather Sting Operation."

The immediate purpose of these investigations by the FWS was to address the illicit sale of eagles and eagle parts and the poaching of eagles. However, the impact of these investigations has awakened fear that the U.S. government is once again encroaching upon tribal culture and religious practices, to the point where the tribal culture and religion may be forced underground once again.

On June 9, 2009 the working group met with the FWS and the Department of Justice (DOJ) to express tribal concerns about raids that were conducted by the FWS, FBI and other law enforcement officials who seized feathers and demanded documentation. Under federal law, only Native people can possess eagle feathers through gifts or inheritance, or from a government-run repository near Denver which issues permits specifically for individual birds or parts, generally after lengthy waits.

As a result of this meeting, FWS and DOJ pledged to take action regarding their lack of effective outreach and education to tribes on policies regarding the possession, use, gifting, and crafting of eagle feathers and other endangered birds. FWS proposed the development of a Tribal Advisory Group to work out long term solutions to the issues that tribes raised. At the end of the three hour meeting, tribal leaders stated that there are still some significant differences between tribal rights and federal policies yet to work out.

At its 2009 Mid-Year Session on June 14-17, the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) adopted a resolution supporting the establishment of Tribal Advisory Group to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in order to provide consultation on the policies, regulations, and procedures for the acquisition, possession, gifting, crafting, and use of eagles and other migratory birds by tribal members. It was also resolved that Native American Rights Fund (NARF) shall serve as a central clearinghouse for the cases appertaining to the "Eagle Feather Sting Operation" being conducted by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife and other federal law enforcement agencies.

NCAI will convene a meeting with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and other federal law enforcement agencies to discuss and seek solutions as to the effects and impacts of eagle feather confiscations.

Tribes are urging the Department of the Interior to respect the rights of American Indian people under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the 1994 Clinton Executive Memorandum, and all implementing federal regulations and policies interpreting these laws as under-girded by the federal trust responsibility to Indian people in the protection and advancement of Indian culture and religion.