

Bush returns 15,000 acres to Colorado River Tribe

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WASHINGTON - More than 15,000 acres off Interstate 10 in western Arizona that were taken away from the Colorado River Indian Tribes' reservation 90 years ago are being returned under a bill President Bush signed into law Tuesday.

The 25-square-mile parcel about 175 miles west of Phoenix near Quartzsite and the California-Arizona line is known as the La Paz lands. It was removed from the reservation by President Woodrow Wilson amid tribal disputes with miners and cattlemen.

Bush on Tuesday offered no specific comment in signing the bill, sponsored by Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz.

The Colorado River Indian Reservation lies along the Colorado River in western Arizona and eastern California. Members are from the Navajo, Chemeheuvi, Hopi and Mohave tribes. The 15,375 returned acres now will combine with the tribe's other 270,000 acres of reservation to comprise its southern boundary.

"We've been working for decades to have these lands returned to our people because we believe it is the fair and right thing for the federal government to do," Tribal Chairman Daniel Eddy Jr. said in a statement. The new law, which removes control of the land from the Bureau of Land Management, was passed last week by the Senate on a voice vote. The House passed it in April.

The legislation prohibits use of the land for gaming.

In an interview Tuesday, tribal Attorney General Eric Shepard said one of the goals of the tribe is to develop its property in ways that will best benefit the 3,600 tribal members. As of now, he said, there are no specific plans.

"This has been completely about righting the historic wrong," Shepard said. "There has not been a lot of long-term planning. This has not been about long-term development."

La Paz County and Quartzsite officials on Tuesday said they were happy for the tribe, despite some initial concerns raised that returning the tract to the reservation would undercut hopes for potential development of I-10 near Ehrenberg as a gateway to and from California.

"I think it's a great thing. I'm very happy for them," said Gene Fisher, chairman of the La Paz County Board of Supervisors, who's been supportive of the land-return throughout. "It'll have no negative impact on the county. In fact, it can only have a positive impact if they decide to do some development of the tract. That could mean jobs."

As for whether the return to the tribe may represent a loss to the county of potential tax revenue, Fisher noted the land wasn't generating any such revenue all of these years "while in the federal government's hands, anyhow."

Added Quartzsite town manager and town lawyer Dan Field : "It's no longer the cowboys and Indians stuff out here. It's now governmental entities trying to work together.

"I'm happy for them. It was a hard thing (to get accomplished) and a tough road," Field added.

He said that although he has been told the tribe is not yet thinking about developing the land, he said, "It'd be nice if they did."

For one thing, he said, the town and tribe could "be partners" on finding ways to bring more water into the area, especially if the tribe does plan to develop it.

Shepard praised Grijalva's determination to get the bill passed, and specifically singled out Arizona GOP Rep. Rick Renzi's efforts in aiding Grijalva in the House. He said support from both Arizona senators, Republicans John McCain and Jon Kyl also was key.

The bill also was co-sponsored in the House by Democratic Rep. Ed Pastor, and GOP Reps. J.D. Hayworth, Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe.

Grijalva's success in getting it passed is historically noteworthy. Former GOP Sen. Barry Goldwater introduced similar legislation in 1980 and 1981, but that bill did not pass. Grijalva's bill, first introduced in 2003, was the first attempt at a legislative remedy since Goldwater's.

Grijalva, like Shepard, emphasized Tuesday that the bill simply restores to the tribe what belongs to it.

"This concludes what has been a historical injustice that for many years a lot of people have tried to correct," Grijalva said. He said he is happy to have played a role in the restoration to the tribe of part of its ancestral homeland.

The La Paz lands in dispute were part the southern area of the reservation in 1876 by order of President Ulysses S. Grant, according to the bill.

But Wilson ordered that section removed in 1915 after assertions there had been a boundary-survey error, and amid increasingly frequent conflicts there between the tribes and encroaching miners and cattlemen.

Since then, however, historical evidence compiled by the Interior Department shows there never was a boundary-line error.

In a hearing in the U.S. House on the bill last year, a representative of the Bush administration said the administration supported the return of the land to the tribe, though it had some concerns.

The final legislation passed took into account some of those concerns. Grijalva said it contains a requirement that existing rights-of-way - be they railroad or other state or federal rights - will be maintained.

In addition, two parcels totaling 840 acres of Arizona State Trust land that were created within the La Paz Lands along I-10 are not included in the transfer back to the tribe. The state will continue to have access along the interstate.

The legislation also requires tribal recognition of all remaining mining claims and utility easements on the site.

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