Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Acting Secretary of the Interior John C. Whitaker and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morris Thompson announced today a decision, the result of which is that the Chemehuevi Tribe of Indians has equitable title to 18 miles of shoreline along Lake Havasu, a portion of the Colorado River. The shoreline is located in San Bernardino County about forty miles southeast of Needles California.

The decision administratively puts to rest an ownership dispute concerning over 21 miles of shoreline which has been pending before the Department for several years.

The lands in question were owned by the Chemehuevi Tribe prior to construction of Parker Dam. In 1941, however, pursuant to an Act of Congress, Secretary Ickes designated the lands be taken as part of a "freeboard" area for the reservoir, Lake Havasu, created behind the dam. Sixteen miles of the shoreline have been administered as public lands since that date, and five and one-half miles were included in Havasu National Wildlife Refuge.

The Tribe has claimed ownership of the lands and complained that it was denied access to the Lake. The Tribe pointed out that the shoreline lands were the only part of the reservation which were habitable and retained any value after 1940. Acting Secretary Whitaker's decision modifies the 1941 designation with the result that the Tribe has equitable title to the lands, subject to a flowage easement in the United States.

Acting Secretary Whitaker said "today's decision was made after an exhaustive study of its environmental consequences, and careful review of a comprehensive environmental impact statement prepared pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. It permits maximum utilization of their reservation lands by the Indians, while preserving for the wildlife refuge all lands essential to its operation.” The dividing line between the Indian lands and those within the refuge will be a point north of Catfish Bay, to be fixed by survey.