Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Interior Associate Deputy Secretary James E. Cason today announced that the Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED) has approved a $140,000 grant to the Pueblo of Laguna Utility Authority to study the feasibility of having the PLUA provide affordable electricity service throughout the tribe's lands in west-central New Mexico. The Pueblo of Laguna is located approximately 45 miles west of the city of Albuquerque.

"When a tribe forms its own electric utility, it takes a first step toward achieving energy independence," Cason said. "I commend the Pueblo of Laguna and the PLUA on their vision of becoming an electric service provider as one way to support their economic future."

The study will examine the feasibility of the PLUA operating the electrical utility system serving the tribe's main reservation and three separate land areas while providing improved service at costs no higher than its customers now pay. The study also will establish electrical reliability standards, and identify the type and cost of electrical distribution system improvements needed to meet those standards, as well as address the practicality of developing village-scale renewable energy projects.

Established by the tribe in 1998 to promote using utility services to improve the health and welfare of tribal members, the PLUA also seeks to improve electricity service in order to attract high technology businesses to the 533,000-acre reservation, which is traversed by Interstate 40, a major east-west thoroughfare spanning the state.

The grant will be administered under IEED's 477 Program, established in 1994 under the Indian Employment, Training and Related Services Act (Public Law 102-477), which allows federally recognized tribes to combine funds from up to 12 federal employment, training and welfare reform programs administered by Interior and the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services into a single, tribally operated program with a single reporting system. Participating tribes, which includes the Pueblo of Laguna, can devote up to 25 percent of their total 477 funding for economic development projects to provide employment opportunities for their members.

The Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development was established to provide high-level support for the Department's goal of serving tribal communities by providing access to energy resources and helping tribes stimulate job creation and economic development, and supporting the President's National Energy Policy by fostering development of domestic energy resources to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign energy sources.

The IEED sponsored a conference in March on tribal utility formation at Fort Mojave, Nev. "As a result of that conference, more tribes are showing an interest in establishing their own electric utilities," Cason said.

For more information on the IEED grant award, tribal utility initiative or the 477 Program's economic development features, contact Jack Stevens, Chief, Division of Economic Development, Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development, at (202) 208-6764.

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