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Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ada E. Deer signed a preliminary decision in which she proposes to deny Federal recognition of the Duwamish Tribal Organization of Renton, WA, a petitioner for Federal acknowledgment as an Indian tribe.

"The petitioner failed to meet three of the fundamental criteria contained in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 25, Section 83.7," Ms. Deer said.

This preliminary decision means that the Washington group would not be eligible for certain rights and benefits accorded tribes that are granted "Federal recognition" or "acknowledgment" and therefore have a government-to-government relationship with the United States.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) determined that the Duwamish group is an organization of Duwamish descendants that has existed since 1925. While the petitioner's individual members can trace their ancestry back to a historical Duwamish tribe, the petitioner has not existed as a tribal entity continuously since the time of first sustained contact between the historical Duwamish tribe and non-Indians. The petitioner has been identified by external observers as an Indian entity, but only since about 1940. The petitioner does not form, and has not formed, a distinct social or geographical community in western Washington. Its organization has functioned for limited purposes since 1925 and has exercised no meaningful political influence or authority over its members.

A historical Duwamish tribe was described as consisting of the Indians living at the confluence of the Black, Cedar, and Duwamish Rivers south of Lake Washington, as well as along the Green and White Rivers and the eastern shore of Puget Sound in the area of Elliott Bay. A distinct Duwamish community continued to exist in this area until about 1900. The petitioner's organization came into existence in 1925. This Duwamish Tribal Organization has not exercised political influence or authority over its members. No evidence shows that members were involved actively in making decisions for the group or resolving disputes among themselves. The petitioner's current members do not maintain a community that is distinct from the surrounding non-Indian population. The group's geographical dispersion is consistent with other evidence showing that members do not maintain, and have not maintained, significant social contact with each other. Since 1925, the social activities of the petitioner's members with other members, outside the organization's annual meetings, took place within their own extended families, but not outside their own family lines. Identifications made by outside observers of a Duwamish community before 1900 and an organization after 1940 do not identify the same entity and do not link the modern petitioner to the historical tribe as an Indian entity which has continued to exist over time.

The BIA employs historians, anthropologists, and genealogists to research the claims of groups seeking recognition as Indian tribes. Each case is evaluated individually according to the seven mandatory e criteria for Federal acknowledgment. Although revised acknowledgment regulations became effective March 28, 1994, the Duwamish Tribal Organization chose, as provided in 25 CFR 83.3(g) of the revised regulations, to complete their petitioning process under the previous acknowledgment regulations.

Currently, there are 554 federally-recognized American Indian tribes. Tribes recognized through the acknowledgment process within the past year are the Huron Potawatomi of MI and the Jena Band of Choctaws of LA.

Under the regulations, the Duwamish and interested parties have 120 days to comment on the Assistant Secretary's proposed finding that would deny Federal recognition. All comments must be in writing and should be addressed to the Branch of Acknowledgment and Research, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1849 C Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20240.