Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Carl Shaw (202) 343-4576
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President Ronald Reagan has signed a bill authorizing the federal government to pay the Tohono O'Odham Indians (formerly Papago) in Arizona $30 million in order for the tribe to replace nearly 10,000 acres of reservation land that has been flooded repeatedly since 1979. The Gila Bend Indian Reservation Lands Replacement Act allows the U.S. Interior Department to begin paying the tribe in $10 million allotments over three years beginning in 1988. It is one of the Reagan Administration's largest land settlements with an Indian tribe.

“This settlement goes a long way to affirm the President's message to Indian Country that he is willing to deal with tribes on a government-to-government basis and to enter into negotiations for the settlement of claims rather than litigating these issues for years in court.” said Ross Swimmer, the Interior Department's assistant secretary for Indian affairs. “It reflects a commitment of this administration to all Indian people that their issues are considered seriously and steps are being taken to address those issues through negotiations,” Swimmer added. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1960 built the Painted Rock Dam on the Gila River 10 miles downstream from the Gila Bend Reservation. In 1964, the federal government acquired by eminent domain an easement for occasional overflow onto the reservation.

While government studies throughout the 1960's and 70's stressed the infrequency of overflow, substantial rains in 1979, 1981, 1983 and 1984 produced major flooding on the reservation. A 1983 Bureau of Indian Affairs report found that it would be overly expensive to rehabilitate the flooded lands, which had no protection from future overflows. An additional study concluded that there were no public lands acceptable to the tribe in exchange for the flooded land. The Gila Bend Act allows the tribe to purchase up to 9,880 acres of private land to be taken into trust by the Interior Department.

“While this has been a longstanding issue for the Tohono O’odham people, it is good that we have brought it to a compromised settlement.” Swimmer said.