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The Department of the Interior announced today that it will deny requests to take off-reservation Indian lands into trust status for the purpose of establishing bingo or other gaming enterprises which do not conform with state and local laws. Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ross Swimmer said, "We do not oppose tribal bingo operations on established reservations, but we do not think it is desirable -- or in the tribes' best interests -- to establish small, satellite bingo reservations in or near urban areas. When a reservation or trust land is viewed as tribal homelands, the traditional concept, the special status and laws affecting that land and the tribes make sense. If you distort that concept for the purpose of some quick economic benefits, the whole system is endangered."

The Department is currently holding a number of applications from tribes requesting that land be taken into trust expressly for the purpose of setting up a bingo operation. "If that is the intended use of the land, those requests will be denied," Swimmer said. The Secretary of the Interior is vested by statute with broad discretionary authority to accept land in trust for individual Indians or Indian tribes, within or without existing Indian reservations.

However, the Secretary must consider, the impacts and wisdom of acquiring land in trust for the purpose of extending jurisdictional immunities beyond present reservation boundaries. The new policy preserves the opportunity for off-reservation land to be acquired in trust on a case-by-case basis for purposes such as housing and other, non-gaming business ventures.

Swimmer said the Department and the Reagan Administration supported federal legislation allowing the continued operation of high-stakes bingo on Indian reservations. He added that regulations to ensure that the tribes would be the principal beneficiaries of the games were needed. "In too many situations the professional promoters of the games, or other individuals, are making most of the money," Swimmer said.

"The tribe should be getting the money and using it for tribal governmental purposes." "We are concerned," Swimmer said, "with protecting existing tribal sovereignty and governmental authority in Indian Country."