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For Immediate Release: July 14, 1982
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Interior Secretary James Watt, responding to the President's instructions, today announced formation of a Policy Advisory Group and negotiating teams to spearhead his Department's effort to achieve negotiated settlements for the more than 50 outstanding lawsuits over Indian water claims.

"President Reagan has forcefully indicated his concern that these suits-- which have stalled essential economic progress in both Indian and non-Indian areas--be settled quickly through negotiated settlements that are equitable to all parties," Watt said.

"To be successful, negotiations must include everyone concerned, including the Federal Government, and Federal representatives must thoroughly understand the issues and local concerns," he said.

The Interior Policy Advisory Group will be chaired by Interior Solicitor William H. Coldiron and include Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Kenneth L. Smith, Assistant Secretary for Land and Water Resources Garrey E. Carruthers and Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks G. Ray Arnett Also in the Group will be Fish and Wildlife Service Director Robert Jantzen, National Park Service Director Russell Dickenson and Bureau of Reclamation
Commissioner Robert N. Broadbent.

The Group will advise him on policy issues involved in various negotiations, Watt said, and help in the selection of negotiating teams to work in the field.

It is expected that most teams will be headed by agency officials, including Department of Justice lawyers, who "will have complete access to the Interior Department's resources through Deputy under Secretary William P. Horn, who I have asked to be the Chief Coordinator of Negotiations," Watt said.

The teams, which will include Interior officials from Washington, D.C., and field offices and other Federal agency officials as appropriate, will be designed to work on groups of claims and conduct day-to-day negotiations.

The teams will be assisted by local Advisory Boards appointed by the Secretary. "These Boards will include a full cross-sect ion of affected local interests in Indian and non-Indian communities, 11 Watt said.”They will provide the vital historic, social and environmental background essential to equitable and successful negotiation," Watt said.

Watt noted that legislation would be required in many instances to implement negotiated water suit settlements.

"Lawsuits consume time and resources that could be put to the more productive use of developing resources once the water is allocated," Watt said

"But all concerned must realize that the President and I will support only those negotiated settlements that were developed by all affected parties and represent a fair settlement of both financial and water disputes. The recent Papago case is demonstrative. Negotiations, which did not involve the Federal

Government, yielded a settlement that required the United States to pay an unfair share of costs which were primarily the obligations of local water users. The President vetoed the legislative enactment of the Papago plan and will continue to object to similar unbalanced settlements," he said.