Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Forrest Gerard today announced a policy decision governing the procedures for planning Indian water projects.

The new policy will provide for a more appropriate analysis of water development projects on Indian lands as part of the implementation of the Principles and Standards for Planning Water and Related Land Resources of the Water Resources Council.

Under the policy, economic effects of water projects on Indians will be calculated and will be considered along with national economic and environmental quality effects. This information will aid the Secretary in determining whether such projects merit departmental approval. In addition, this new policy requires, for the first time, an assessment by the affected tribe of the extent to which a particular project does or does not contribute to the social well-being of the tribe. The assessment includes demographic effects on the reservation, effects on sacred sites, fish and wildlife habitats and on archaeological and historical sites.

Secretary Andrus said the policy was a direct result of President Carter's Water Policy message of June 6, 1978. In his message, Carter strongly favored a negotiated process to settle Indian water claims. However efforts to pursue negotiated settlements have been hampered because the current water planning procedures as applied have not embodied adequate recognition of the trust relationship that exists between Indian tribes and the Federal Government.

Assistant Secretary Gerard said: "This new policy should not only help to encourage water rights-talks in many areas of the country, but will also help to correct a long-standing inequity. "

Gerard said that "comparisons of median income and unemployment statistics clearly show that Indian tribes have not shared in the increasing wealth of our Nation equally with others over the years. I feel that this new Interior policy is a major step toward bringing President Carter's call for the maintenance of Indian reservations as 'permanent tribal homelands' closer to reality. "