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The Department of the Interior announced today that it favors the enactment of legislation to fix the final construction cost of irrigation works already constructed on the Wapato-Status Unit of the Wapato Indian Irrigation Project in Washington and to allocate that cost on a per-acre basis to the lands that can be served by these works.

In commenting on H. R. 12771, the Department pointed out that the bill is an outgrowth of the desire on the part of the Wapato-Status landowners to know with certainty the total construction charges against their lands.

“Although construction of the unit is not complete,” the Department said in its report, “we believe that it is sufficiently advanced to make feasible a designation of the acreage which can be served by the irrigation works already constructed, and an allocation of the cost of the works to those lands. Any lands thereafter brought within the system would pay the entire cost of the new construction but would pay no part of the cost of the construction already completed. The construction cost allocated to the ‘new’ land might therefore be either more or less than the cost allocated to the land now served.”

The Wapato-Status Unit consists of approximately 138,000 acres including 130,000 acres now served by the project works. Of the total, 85,228 acres are owned by Indians and 52,772 by non-Indians.

Under existing law construction costs of irrigation works assessed against Indian lands are deferred until the lands go out of Indian ownership, Consequently the difference between the construction costs allocated to the "old" and the “new" lands are important only in the case of the non-Indian acreage.

“The new land to be brought within the system, “the Department’s report stated, “it is estimated to be about 8,000 acres, of which only 1,500 acres are owned by non-Indians. All of the land is interspersed with presently irrigated land and the cost of extending the irrigation system to the new land is expected to be considerably less than the per-acre cost of the works already constructed. If this additional cost were combined with the cost of the constructed works" the change in the assessment against the non-Indian land would be negligible. In view of this fact and in view of the fact that the non-Indians involved want their total obligation to be fixed on the basis of the present construction, we believe that the enactment of the bill is justified.”