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In response to wishes of the tribal membership, the Department of the Interior has proposed legislation providing for division of tribal assets of the Ponca Indians of northeastern Nebraska and discontinuing their special Indian relations with the Federal Government, Assistant Secretary John A. Carver, Jr., reported today.

Under a bill suggested to Congress by the Department, division of the assets would be made only if approved by a majority of the adult members of the tribe.

The bill provides that each member of the tribe would be given the opportunity of selecting not more than five acres of tribal land as a homesite, but would be required to pay the tribe its current market value. All tribal lands remaining after these homesite purchases would be sold by the Government and the proceeds distributed among the eligible tribal members.

The tribal land now consists of about 690 acres valued at approximately $70,000. In addition, tribal trust funds totaling about $28,000 and Federal property worth approximately $7,400 would be included in the distribution. Under the bill, individuals eligible to share in the property distribution would be those whose names appear on a tribal membership roll prepared in 1934 and 1935, together with their living descendants of one-fourth or more Ponca blood. Although the number of these eligible is not now known, the Bureau estimates it as approximately 525. About 130 of these live on or near the reservation.

In addition to the tribally owned land there are 13 tracts comprising about 2,180 acres on the reservation which were allotted years ago to individual tribal members. As a result of inheritance, 387 individuals now share the ownership of these tracts. Under the proposed bill, Federal restrictions against their sale would be removed three years after enactment. Meanwhile, the Secretary of the Interior would have authority to sell any tracts and distribute the proceeds upon application of those owning a one-fourth or more interest in the particular parcel.

Legislation to provide for property division has been requested by the Poncas at several tribal meetings beginning in early 1957. Terms similar to the proposed bill were unanimously approved by those present at meetings in 1959 and again in 1961, and were favored by a substantial majority of those responding to a mailed Questionnaire.