Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Robert L. Bennett, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, today praised the wildfire-fighting Indians of seven tribal groups who were commended in a joint resolution by the Southwest Interagency Fire Committee for their work during last summer's fire season.

In the course of what experts have called the greatest fire outbreak in the history of organized fire-fighting, one of the Indian men lost his life.

Frank Rios, 19, a Papago from Crow Hang, Ariz., was fighting a fire in the San Bernardino National Forest in California when the wind changed and increased in speed, forming a pocket of gas that exploded and killed him.

The Committee (SWIFCO) paid special tribute to Rios, adding: Southwest Interagency Fire Committee wishes to honor and commend the tribes of the Southwest and the Papago Tribe in particular for their standing service _to their country during the 1967 fire season." "The Indian out The committee (SWIFCO) is made up of representatives of the State of Arizona, of the state's water resource, land and forestry departments, of Arizona colleges and universities that have resource interests, and representatives of the United States Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Bennett pointed out that these and other Indian fire-fighters traveled all over the West to fulfill their mission.

"An unusually prolonged dry period in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana made a powder keg of the forest and range," the Commissioner recalled. "On the Mescalero Indian Reservation in New Mexico uncontrolled wildfire burned over 800 acres of forest and 425 men, 14 bulldozers, 5 aircraft and innumerable pieces of additional rolling stock were needed to put it out; a fire on the Quinault Reservation covered" approximately 6,000 acres before it was controlled.

“To these and dozens of other demands, the Indian fire-fighters responded magnificently."

“In a letter to each of the tribal groups Bennett enclosed a copy of the SWIFCO resolution and noted that the costs of suppression and damage resulting from fires run into the millions of dollars.

“Indian fire fighters can take pride in their efforts to minimize these losses," he said.

Participating tribes included the White Mountain Apaches, San Carlos Apaches, Hopis, Navajos, Papagos, Zunis, and United Pueblos. Throughout the country an estimated 4,000 Indians took part in forest fire activities.