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Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus announced today that a task force has been named to develop a proposed legislative settlement for the Catawba Indian Tribe's South Carolina land claim.

The three-member task force will include Interior Solicitor Leo M. Krulitz; James Moorman, Assistant Attorney General; and Eliot R. Cutler, Associate Director, Office of Management and Budget. Krulitz and Cutler were also members of the Maine Indian Claims task force which developed the proposed settlement of the Passamaquoddy-Penobscot land claims announced in February.

"The Catawba task force will work closely with the tribe, state officials, the South Carolina congressional delegation and others to work out the fairest possible settlement plan consistent with the Catawbas' rights to the land," said Andrus.

The Interior Department recommended last August that the Justice Department begin legal action on behalf of the tribe to recover its 140,000- acre reservation. The 15-mile square area surrounds the town of Rock Hill in the state's north central section.

In announcing the legal recommendation last summer, Krulitz noted that the tribe has sought federal help in asserting its claim since 1904. He said the U.S. has a long-neglected duty under the Non-Intercourse Act to nullify the 1840 Treaty with South Carolina.

The tribe occupied a much larger area before 1763 when it relinquished claim to Great Britain on the assurance that possession of the 15 mile square would be secure. After the Revolutionary War, the new U.S. government did not break the 1763 Catawba Treaty, the Solicitor said. The tribe thus claims a vested right in its reservation.

In 1840, after non-Indians had overrun the reservation despite Catawba protests, the tribe finally purported to convey by treaty its remaining title and interest in the 140,000 acres to the State of South Carolina. But the federal government was not involved in negotiations and never consented to the treaty. Under the Non-Intercourse Act, such treaties are void without federal consent.

"We would much prefer a negotiated settlement to lengthy and disruptive litigation," said Andrus. "We hope the task force can accomplish that."