Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Herndon (202) 343-5717
For Immediate Release: January 12, 1978
Print PDF

In a step aimed at clearing the way for an exchange of land between the Federal Government and the Navajo Indian Tribe, the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management is proposing the withdrawal from mineral entry of 57,000 acres of public land in San Juan County, New Mexico.

The land exchange would allow the Navajos to acquire land where Tribal families are now living. The Bureau of Land Management would acquire approximately 80,000 acres 'in McKinley County within the El Malpais Outstanding Natural Area south of Grants, New Mexico.

The Navajos and BLM have been working on this exchange for several years and the Tribe has been acquiring land in El Malpais for trading stock. When finalized, the exchange will allow the Navajos to hold the land they acquire in trust for Tribal members currently using the area. The land acquired by the Federal Government would allow BLM to "block up" the Outstanding Natural Area to help preserve the unique lava flow and other geologic features for the public.

Purpose of the proposed withdrawal is to prevent additional staking of mining claims in the 57,000 acres to be acquired by the Navajo Tribe. There is 'some uranium in the area and some claims have been staked. The exchange will be subject to a reservation of coal and other minerals to the United States, and after the exchange is completed, the withdrawal would be revoked and the lands reopened to mineral entry.

Interior spokesman explained that the land is being temporarily withdrawn from mineral entry because mining claims staked on public land carry an encumbrance on the transfer of surface rights. No such encumbrance is incurred after surface rights have passed from Federal ownership. The BLM State Director in New Mexico will work out an agreement with the Navajo Tribe concerning the conditions for transfer of mineral rights after surface rights have passed to the tribe.