Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Interior Secretary Gale Norton and Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Dave Anderson today formally signed an agreement with leaders of the Zuni Tribe of New Mexico that will resolve the tribe's water rights claims in the Little Colorado River Basin of Arizona without harming other water users.

"This agreement creates a productive partnership among the Zuni Tribe, other water users in the basin, the State of Arizona, and the Federal Government to begin restoring the Zuni Heaven Reservation in Arizona," Secretary Norton said in signing the settlement. "This collaboration will work to conserve the land and water resources they all share."

Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona, who sponsored Congressional legislation that provided a framework to resolve these Zuni water rights issues and spoke at the ceremony, called the settlement a "fair and final solution that protects access to water for rural Arizonans while respecting the religious beliefs of the Zuni Tribe."

Assistant Secretary Anderson congratulated the Tribe for its accomplishment saying, "The Tribe's commitment to the process of working with the Interior Department, Congress, the State of Arizona and local water users to resolve their claims has resulted in the preservation of a site sacred to the Zuni people."

Wilford Eriacho, chairman of the Zuni Tribe's Water Rights Negotiating Team, said the settlement assures the Zuni people that the wetlands of the Zuni Heaven Reservation will be restored as close as possible to their original condition. "It will help us to preserve our religious traditions by ensuring that the Zuni will continue to make pilgrimage to the lands our ancestors call home."

Also attending the ceremony were Rep. Steve Pearce of New Mexico, Lt. Gov. Carmelita Sanchez of Zuni Pueblo, Zuni Councilman Eduard Wemytewa, and Joan Sandy of the Zuni Tribe.

The Zuni Indian Tribe Water Rights Settlement Agreement, which Congress ratified and confirmed on June 23, 2003, resolves claims associated with the Zuni Heaven Reservation in the Little Colorado River Basin of northeastern Arizona. The agreement would not affect any claims or water rights for the Zuni Tribe's homeland reservation in New Mexico.

The Tribe will be entitled to purchase annually up to 3,600 acre-feet of surface water rights in addition to existing surface water rights on the Zuni Heaven Reservation. The settlement also recognizes the right of the Zuni Tribe to annually withdraw or use up to 1,500 acre-feet of ground water from wells on specified Zuni lands.

The settlement provides $19.2 million from a Zuni Indian Tribe Water Rights Development Fund to be used by the Tribe for riparian and wetlands restoration activities. These include acquiring necessary state-based water rights from willing sellers.

The United States Government will contribute the bulk of the funds. The State of Arizona will contribute

$1.6 million to the tribe’s restoration activities and will make additional settlement contributions. The Salt River Project will contribute $1 million to be used for restoration activities.

The settlement requires the Federal Government to take into trust parcels of land, subject to existing easements and rights of way. The tribe and the United States waive all past, present and future claims to additional water rights for Zuni lands in Arizona.

Since time immemorial, the Zuni people have used the area of Hunt Valley, Arizona -- at the confluence of the Zuni and Little Colorado Rivers in northeastern Arizona -- for sustenance and religious purposes. Tribal religious leaders made regular pilgrimages from their homelands in New Mexico to the Hunt Valley area to worship at the Sacred Lake located there and at surrounding springs, wetlands and riparian areas. These sites are at the core of Zuni religious beliefs, but are threatened by deterioration as a result of other development in the area.

Recognizing the need to protect these sacred sites and provide for their use by future generations of Zuni people, Congress established the Zuni Heaven Reservation in 1984 to protect these sacred lands. Securing water rights for these reservation lands is necessary to enable restoration of the resources and sacred sites and to return them to meaningful religious use.