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PHOENIX - Following approval by Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, the largest Indian water rights settlement in U.S. history is now fully in effect, concluding more than three decades of extraordinary effort by federal, state and tribal leaders to resolve critical water use issues facing tribal communities and the State of Arizona.

"The Arizona Water Rights Settlements Act is a triumph of cooperation and consensus over conflict and litigation," said Interior Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Carl Artman, who spoke on behalf of Secretary Kempthorne at an event celebrating the historic legislation. "This landmark agreement offers us a model of how states, Indian tribes, cities, farmers and the federal government - working together as neighbors and partners - can overcome deep-seated disputes with creative solutions that allow equitable benefits for all water users."

The legislation, approved by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2004, was fully implemented after Secretary Kempthorne signed two Statements of Findings on Dec. 10, 2007, finishing all actions necessary to complete the Gila River Indian Community Water Rights Settlement and amend the Southern Arizona Water Rights Settlement Act of 1982, involving the Tohono O'odham Nation.

"The Settlement Act provides the Gila River Indian Community and the Tohono O'odham Nation access to assured water allocations and the financial resources necessary to develop their land and water resources, expand their economies and ensure a better quality of life for tribal members, their children and grandchildren," Artman said. "Now that the legislation is fully and finally effective, all of the benefits promised can be delivered and these tribal water rights claims, among the largest in the West, can be put to rest."

Artman praised Senator Jon Kyl, the principal sponsor of the legislation, calling him "the catalyst who brought more than three dozen stakeholders to the negotiating table and the constant guardian who shepherded the agreement through the Congress." Artman also thanked Governor Janet Napolitano, Sen. John McCain, former Rep. J.D. Hayworth, Gila River Indian Community Governor William R. Rhodes and Tohono O' odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris, Jr. for their efforts in securing this settlement.

Artman commended Interior and other federal officials who worked with congressional staff, Arizona state officials and tribal leaders on this integrated package of agreements that benefit all central Arizona communities that receive Colorado River Water. "The Secretary would like to personally acknowledge and thank David Bernhardt, the Department's Solicitor, for his work on this Act," Artman noted. "David has been our key Interior lead on this settlement since January 2001. His effective coordination -- both within Interior as well as with the local, tribal, state and congressional leaders - was essential to the success we celebrate today."

Commissioner Bob Johnson represented Interior's Bureau of Reclamation, which played an important role in the negotiations, at the celebration. Other speakers included Ms. Susan Bitter Smith, President of the Board, Central Arizona Project; Ms. Gloria Montana, Chief of Staff for Rep. Raul Grijalva; and

Herb Guenther, Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources

"Secretary Kempthorne believes that one of the greatest challenges facing us as state, regional and national leaders in the 21st century is meeting the increasing and often competing water needs of our dynamic communities," Artman said. "Yet we share the conviction that there is no problem created by humans that current and future generations cannot solve, if they are equipped with the right tools."

The Arizona Water Rights Settlements Act and similar settlements and pacts across the West serve as models to other states and regions that are struggling with water shortages, especially those suffering droughts and adapting their water management to deal with long-term climate change, Artman noted. "The simple fact is that the Earth is warming, and drought is not just a Western problem."

States and water districts need to avoid debilitating legal and political conflicts over the allocation of finite water resources because there are no true winners in resolving water disputes, unless everyone gets something and everyone gives up something, Artman noted. "And as Secretary Kempthorne has said, "Though the process can succeed only through compromise, all of us at Interior fully appreciate how exceedingly difficult it is to accept a lesser benefit in order to achieve a greater good."

"Yet the hard reality is that years-long litigation over water rights works to no party's benefit, exacts enormous financial costs and creates further obstacles to long-range economic planning and development," Artman noted. "With good faith and perseverance, using our best science and technology and working in a spirit of enlightened compromise, we can reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. The Arizona Water Rights Settlements Act reflects such a vital accomplishment."