Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Tozier - Int. 4306 | Information Service
For Immediate Release: August 8, 1957
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Assistant Secretary of the Interior Roger Ernst today urged congressional enactment of legislation to authorize extension of the irrigation distribution system of the Coachella Valley County Water District of Riverside County, California, to about 10,000 acres of Indian land on the Augustine, Cabazon and Torres-Martinez Reservations.

Under the bill, recently proposed by the Department, the extension would be constructed by the Department at an estimated cost of about $2,000,000. It would be operated and maintained after construction by the County Water District. Half of all the money collected by the District each year for delivery of water to the Indian lands would be paid to the United States until the Government is fully reimbursed for the construction costs.

The purpose of the legislation is to modify a plan originally embodied in a 1950 law. The 1950 act contemplated that adequate arrangements could be worked out between the District and the Department for extending the system to the Indian lands, but this proved not to be feasible. The plan embodied in the present bill has the approval of both the District and the Department.

Failure to extend the system to the Indian lands, Mr. Ernst pointed out, will result in extending the system to more non-Indian lands, and the Indian will be the loser.

Of the Indian acreage involved, about 600 acres are on the Augustine Reservation, 1,900 on the Cabazon, and 7,700 on Torres-Martinez. While the first two tribal groups have formally endorsed the proposed legislation, the Torres-Martinez position is not yet wholly clear. Mr. Ernst recommended that the latter group be omitted from the bill unless it indicates a positive wish to be included by the time the bill is considered in committee.