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The Department of the Interior favors the enactment of legislation that would permit further leasing of lands on the Colorado River Indian Reservation in western Arizona and southeastern California, Assistant Secretary Roger Ernst announced today.

In a report to Congress on S. 2286, a bill to authorize such leasing, Mr. Ernst pointed out that the absence of leasing Authority is now "hampering the orderly development of the reservation." In addition, he said, many leases previously granted will be expiring soon and the lessees are unable to plan sound programs without assurance of renewal.

S. 2286 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to lease the portions of the reservation not assigned to individual Indians and to approve leases of the assigned lands made by the holders of the assignments.

Special authority is necessary to authorize leasing of Colorado River Reservation lands, Mr. Ernst explained, because of the uncertainty as to beneficial ownership of the property. The Reservation was established by an 1865 law for the "Indians of said [Colorado] River and its tributaries." Whether the Indians now settled on the reservation are the exclusive owners is a question now in litigation.

Recognizing this uncertainty, Congress in 1955 passed a law authorizing the Secretary of the Interior, for a period of two years, to lease the unassigned lands. The authority expired August 14, 1957. The day before it expired, an Arizona corporation signed a 25-year lease on some 67,000 acres of the reservation. However, the lease was cancelled May 13, 1958, when the corporation failed to explain satisfactorily its failure to post a $5 million performance bond. The terms of the lease required the bond.

The reservation contains slightly over 100,000 acres of potentially irrigable land. Approximately one-third of this has so far been developed for irrigation through the use of Federal funds.