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The Department of the Interior favors legislation that would authorize transferring to the Navajo Indian Tribe full title and responsibility for all irrigation projects on the 15,000,000-acre reservation in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton announced today.

Under its terms, the Navajos would permanently assume all operation and maintenance costs, estimated at $200,000 a year. They have borne this cost since January 1, 1958.

In submitting to Congress a proposed bill that would authorize the transfer, the Department pointed out that the Navajo Tribal Council indicated a desire and willingness to take on operational responsibility for the projects in resolutions of September 18, 1957, and February 14, 1958.

The projects involved include 67 units on which the Indian Bureau maintains active records plus an unknown number of others that are inoperative, abandoned or left to management by individual Indians and not carried on the Bureau's books. They were built by the Federal Government over the years since 1884 and have been maintained and operated as a Federal responsibility for the benefit of the Indians. They range in size from 100 to 6,000 acres and embrace a total of nearly 34,000 acres.

Under the legislation proposed by the Department, the Tribe's control over the transferred projects will be unrestricted but the facilities and the income from them will be tax-exempt as long as the facilities continue to be owned by the Tribe or by a legal entity controlled by the Tribe or its members.

Reimbursable construction costs of the projects, amounting to about $5,900,000, will not be affected by the legislation. However, under the Leavitt Act of 1932, these costs will not be assessed against the lands until the lands pass out of Indian ownership.