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The Department of the Interior today announced two actions looking toward a greater equalization in the value of extremely valuable individual Indian land holdings on the Agua Caliente Reservation at Palm Springs, California.

One was the recent submission to Congress of a report favoring the enactment, with amendments, of H.R. 5557, a bill that deals with the equalization problem.

The second action taken was the adoption in final form of a set of administrative instructions for equalization. These were published as a proposal in the Federal Repository last January 23.

The widely varying values of the lands allotted to individual members of the Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians have been the subject of litigation extending back over a period of many years. Under a 1956 court order the Department is required to formulate and carry out a program of allotting additional lands from the common tribal holdings in a way that will equalize the value of the individual allotments to the fullest feasible extent. In view of the high values of the Indian lands within the city of Palm Springs, very substantial sums of money are involved.

H. R. 5557, the bill recommended by the Department for enactment, would confine the equalization to living members of the tribe and base it on 1957 and 1958 appraisals of the property valuations. The bill would remove the present legal limitation of 160 acres on allotments to individuals, would exclude certain specified tribal lands from the equalization process, and would require allotment of the remaining tribal lands so as to achieve the highest feasible level of equalization.

Under the bill the site of the Palm Springs Airport would be included in the allotment plan. The city, however, would be given a limited time in which to buy the site at its appraised value. If the city exercises this option, any Indians o have chosen allotments in the airport would receive proportionate shares of one price paid by the city instead of land.

The bill also permits the tribe to form a State corporation or other legal entity for holding the reserved tribal lands and requires the Department to transfer such property to this entity on the request of a majority of the adult members.

The Department recommended two amendments to H. R. 5557. One would reduce the tribal reserve containing the mineral spring from an area of about eight acres as described in the bill to a tract of less than three acres immediately surrounding the spring. The spring itself has been described by tribal members as religiously significant to them.

The second amendment would give the Department discretion in transferring reserved tribal properties to a new legal entity instead of requiring such transfer on the petition of a majority. The purpose would be to assure that the legal entity is fairly organized and does not discriminate against a minority of the tribal members.

While reporting favorably on H. R. 5557, the Department also took steps to proceed immediately with

its own plan of equalization in view of the uncertainties of the legislative process. The regulations adopted today provide for (1) the preparation of a map showing the areas of tribal land available for allotment, (2) the compilation of a list of tribal members entitled to participate in equalization in the order of their entitlement, (3) selection of land parcels by the eligible individuals in their order of preference in each group, and (4) the filing applications for the selected parcels with the Sacramento Area Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"The process of making allotment selection on the basis of the present law will begin shortly," the Department pointed out, "but we shall not approve the actual allotment schedule before summer, and if the pending legislation should be enacted during the first session of the 86th Congress the allotment procedure can be modified to comply with the new law."

The Palm Springs Reservation was originally established for the Agua Caliente Band of Mission Indians under a law enacted in 1891. Allotment of the land to individual members was begun in 1923. Because of various complications in legislation and litigation, however, the first allotment schedule was not formally approved by the Secretary of the Interior until 1949.

Under the allotment procedure used, each Band member has been entitled to 47 acres consisting of a two-acre town lot, five acres of irrigated land, and 40 acres of dry land. Although the allotments are thus all equal in acreage, they vary in appraised value today all the way from $74,500 to $629,000. So far 115 allotments have been made. This includes allotments to some members who have since died. Five of the recently born minors have not yet received allotments.

The present membership of the Band is 101 persons--33 adults and 68 minors. The remaining unallotted property, exclusive of the areas recommended for reserves, consists of 23,660 acres valued at approximately $12,800,000. On this basis it is estimated that an equalization value of about $350,000 can be achieved for approximately 80 persons now having the lower valued allotments.

Because H. R. 5557 would remove the 160-acres limitation on allotments, a greater degree of equalization will be possible under its provisions than can be accomplished administratively under existing law.