

Soboba Tribe Settles 62 Year Water Struggle

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On July 31, 2008 President Bush's signature the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians Settlement Act into law ending a sixty two year old Soboba Tribal water rights dispute involving the Eastern Municipal Water District and Metropolitan Water District. Tribal Chairman Adam Castillo filed the original lawsuit in 1946. "It's been a long process" Soboba Tribal Chairman, Robert J. Salgado said at the dedication luncheon held at the Soboba Spring Country Club on Friday, August 15, 2008.



Frank Bellino / The Press-Enterprise

In the photo above Congresswoman Mary Bono Mack presents a copy of the Soboba water rights settlement to Soboba tribal Chairman Robert Salgado Sr. during a ceremony on August 15, 2008 at the Soboba Springs Country Club in San Jacinto. The settlement ends 63 years of Dispute between the tribe, the federal government and local Water Districts in the San Jacinto Valley.

Secretary of the Interior, Dirk Kempthorne referred to the Soboba water rights settlement Friday as "an evaporation of a litigation cloud," and a showing of how cooperation can ensure a water supply and protection of the resource both for the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians and other San Jacinto Valley water users in the future.

Chairman Salgado In congressional testimony earlier this year, Salgado described how the tribe grew melons, beans, corn and fruit trees in irrigated fields. He testified that the loss of the reservation water supply completely destroyed the economic base of the tribe. He said no amount of money will ever compensated the tribal member for the decades they were forced to live without the basic supply of water. He told the congressional committee he remembers as a young boy having to haul water in five gallon containers from the near by city of San Jacinto just to survive. We are not bitter or hold any animosity against anyone he told the committee he has just made us as a people stronger so that we are better prepared to face the next challenge to our Tribal Sovereignty.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Mary Bono Mack, R-Palm Springs, passed the House of Representatives in May of this year. The legislation implements a 1991 federal government settlement and another settlement with San Jacinto Valley water suppliers that took about eight years to resolve.

"I am thrilled an agreement has been reached that will benefit the many individuals and families impacted by this ongoing water dispute," Bono Mack said in a news release. "We would not be at this point without the many years of hard work and cooperation by the tribe, our local water districts and local leaders."

The legislation provides "a secure and reliable water supply not only for the tribe, but the community," Loretta Tuell, Washington, D.C.-based legal counsel for the tribe on the water issue, said by phone. In Indian water rights cases, negotiations, rather than litigation, are "the best means to come to resolution," she said.

The settlement awards the tribe \$18 million from local water districts, \$11 million from the federal government and the right to 2 billion gallons of water a year from the aquifer. The tribe agreed to use no more than half the water allotment for the first 50 years. What isn't used will be available to other local water providers. The tribe is working on a five-year development plan, Salgado said. That also would address use of 128 acres that will be deeded to the tribe near Diamond Valley Lake in the Winchester area.

Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Norwalk, who chairs the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Water and Power, and Rep. Joe Baca, D-Rialto, a member of the subcommittee, also spoke at the event.