

The Region; Tribe Impoverished by Salton Sea Gets Windfall; Reparations: The Torres-Martinez Indians get \$14 million for flooding in 1905.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Unlike neighboring tribes, which have made the most of their tribal lands with flourishing casinos, the Torres-Martinez Indians have been unable to come up with a gambling center because of a lack of funds and their location, tucked deep into the desert community of Thermal.

The settlement is an attempt to right the 96-year-old wrong created when the swollen Colorado River overtook feeble dikes near Yuma, Ariz. The river swept into the Salton Basin, flooding numerous Torres-Martinez communities. In the wake of the flooding, exacerbated by runoff from nearby farms, California had a new lake, the Salton Sea.

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FULL TEXT

It could be argued that the tattered band of Torres-Martinez Indians living on a dusty pocket in the Coachella Valley has been the unluckiest of the state's 100 Indian tribes.

Of their 22,000 acres of reservation land, half lies beneath the Salton Sea, created by a Colorado River flooding accident in 1905.

And unlike neighboring tribes, which have made the most of their tribal lands with flourishing casinos, the Torres-Martinez Indians have been unable to come up with a gambling center because of a lack of funds and their location, tucked deep into the desert community of Thermal.

Poverty has plagued the tribe, considered one of the poorest in the state. But the tribe's luck is poised for a dramatic upswing.

"Today is the end of many years of struggle," said Tribal Chairwoman Mary Belardo, moments after accepting more than \$3 million of a \$14-million settlement check from the federal government and the water districts. "The fruits of all our suffering is about to come to bear."

In a celebration Thursday that included a visit from Rep. Mary Bono (R-Palm Springs) and Interior Secretary Gail Norton, tribal elders said they hoped that years of devastating economic hardships will finally come to an end.

"This is the key that will lift us out of poverty," said the tribe's 67-year-old spiritual leader, Ernie Morreo. "All my life people have been talking about this, but I never thought the day would actually ever come."

After 15 years of litigation against the U.S. government and area water districts, the tribe finally won the right to buy more than 11,000 acres of desert land and 640 acres near Interstate 10, prime location for a new casino. That's in addition to the cash, \$10 million of which will come from the federal government and \$4 million from area water districts.

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The tribe has been seeking reparations for their lost land for more than a decade. The late Rep. Sonny Bono (R-Palm Springs) first took up the fight in 1996. But his bill didn't make it past the Senate.

His widow, Mary Bono, then took on the cause and introduced the Torres-Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians Claims Settlement Act in June 2000.

She said it was Belardo's passion that moved her to get involved. That, and the tribal leader's vivid descriptions of the incredible poverty her tribe endured. During visits with Bono, Belardo even flashed pictures of the makeshift homes of many of the 250 tribal members--portable HUD trailers that did little to shield them from the desert's 120-degree heat.

Many lived without running water or electricity. And the school was so underfunded that the children rarely were given homework, with teachers afraid to allow the school's few textbooks to leave the classroom.

"I am hopeful that in the next few years, all of that will be behind [the tribe]," Bono said. "This opens the door for so many new opportunities and I'm just happy to be a part of it."

The underpinning of the tribe's plan for economic development includes a casino, built on newly acquired land near Interstate 10. But Gov. Gray Davis has to sign off on the idea. Bono is hopeful that Davis will not stand in the tribe's way, although the new casino would be the only one in the country not technically on reservation land.

"Every other tribe here has a right to build a casino," Bono said. "If it is the cornerstone of economic development for these tribes, let it be."

Tribal members, however, are not pinning their hopes only on the casino. There are plans to build a truck stop along California 86. They also hope to build a massive electric power plant that could generate up to \$1 million annually to the band.

Tribe members hope to build new houses, complete with air-conditioning. They want to invest money in the school system. And they want to start investments that will mimic the success of the neighboring Cabazon Indians, who run the successful Fantasy Springs Casino just off Interstate 10 in Indio.

"Today we celebrate victory," Norton said at Thursday's ceremony. "We've all heard the phrase, 'The check is in the

mail.' Well today, we've seen the check delivered--today we end nearly 100 years of inequity."

Illustration

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