

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Court Clears Way for \$940 Million to Tribes

TAHOLAH, WA (2/25/16)-- Federal Judge James Parker issued a final order in New Mexico late Tuesday clearing the way for 699 tribes and tribal organizations across the country to receive \$940 million in the Ramah Navajo v. Jewell class action case. Quinault Nation is to receive \$22 million.

The settlement resolves shortfalls in self-determination contracts at the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

“As the judge said in issuing his ruling, this settlement comes as a result of decades of underpayments to tribes, which forced us to take funds from other cash-strapped budgets to pay for critical programs. This settlement is intended to help right those wrongs,” said Fawn Sharp, President of the Quinault Indian Nation.

“This ruling comes five months after the U.S. Department of the Interior and tribal leaders announced they had reached agreement on this amount,” said Sharp, who is also President of the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians and Vice President of the National Congress of American Indians.

Larry Ralston, Quinault Council Treasurer, said, “It is important for people to realize that there may be restrictions on the expenditure of these funds at Quinault Nation. There are also a number of big ticket expenses that have to take priority, such as the relocation of our village. We have a high school to move, a multi-purpose building to move and much more. We have fish resources to restore and children to educate. We are also in the midst of a land buyback program. This decision is great news, but we need to use the funds to strengthen our tribe and help fill critical gaps in emergency programs. This decision has been a long time in coming and the funds have been desperately needed. No one is getting rich off of this.”

Some underfunded federal contracts in the case reportedly dated back to the 1970s, when a policy change allowed tribes to gain more oversight of federal programs meant to fulfill obligations established through treaties and other agreements.

The case was first filed in 1990 by the Ramah Navajo Chapter, a community of about 4,000 that became the case’s lead plaintiff, along with the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota and Zuni Pueblo.

In 2012, the case went before the U.S. Supreme Court, which sided with the tribes and sent the case back to the lower courts before the Interior Department announced a proposed settlement. The settlement is the latest in a recent string of major agreements between the Interior Department and tribes to resolve legal disputes that languished for years.

“It just shows the Obama administration has been working throughout two terms to stop litigating with tribes,” said Kevin Washburn, who recently resigned from his post as Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. “Now, even in the last year of the administration, they’re getting this lengthy case settled,” he said.

“This court decision is very welcome,” said President Sharp. “In making his ruling Judge

Parker said it is fair, reasonable and adequate. Too much has been lost for me to completely agree with that statement. But while it is important for us to learn from our past, it is also important for us to look to our future. We have a President and an administration that has been working with the tribes, at long last, to try to help us meet our needs on a government-to-government basis. These funds will help, if we manage them properly and invest them correctly. That is what we intend to do," she said.

#####