

House passes long-stalled bill to pay Western Shoshone for land

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WASHINGTON — A measure to reimburse thousands of Western Shoshone Indians for the loss of their ancestral lands passed the House of Representatives on Monday, putting the bill in reach of becoming law after years of dispute.

The Western Shoshone Claims Distribution Act passed on a voice vote. The bill would provide about \$145 million to as many as 6,000 of Nevada's Western Shoshone Indians, who lost their homeland to settlers and others in the 19th century.

Tribal members have long clashed over the legislation. Some oppose it, saying their priority is getting their land back. An apparent majority supports it, contending that seeking the return of millions of acres is not realistic and the money would help tribal members buy basic necessities.

"The needs of our people are simple. Most of our homes don't have telephones, 98 percent don't own computers," said Nancy Stewart, co-chairwoman of the Western Shoshone Claims Steering Committee, which describes itself as a grass-roots tribal organization.

The money has been collecting interest in a bank account since 1979, when the U.S. Court of Claims first awarded \$27 million to the tribe — the 1872 value of the 24 million acres of lands that were lost. Tribal members unwilling to relinquish their claim to the land fought the distribution all the way to the Supreme Court, where they lost in 1985.

"The problem is it's a one-time boost in the arm to everyone, and it's going to leave the same problems we had before we got the money, which is no land base," said Elwood Mose, tribal manager of the Western Shoshone's Te-Moak tribe.

Nevada lawmakers have sought since 2000 to pass legislation to distribute the money. A bill by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., passed the Senate in 2002 and 2003, but the legislation didn't make it to the House floor. Last month Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., dropped his own bill to embrace Reid's and work with House leaders to bring it to a vote.

The measures had the same goal, except Reid's is more explicit in stating that the money sent to tribal members would not be taxed. Gibbons said his measure wouldn't have required tribal members to pay taxes, either. He said he steered clear of such a specific tax provision to avoid jurisdictional disputes in the House, where the Ways and Means Committee must sign off on bills with tax implications.

That dispute threatened to hang up the legislation earlier this month, when a scheduled vote was postponed. Gibbons and other lawmakers ultimately resolved the concerns.

"I think it is time that the Shoshone members enjoy the benefit of what the court has said belongs to them, and this bill simply attempts to do just that," Gibbons said before the vote.

The bill also would create a \$1.5 million fund to provide educational grants to tribal members. The bill must go back to the Senate for final passage before going to President Bush for his signature. Gibbons said he thinks the administration will be supportive.

The Western Shoshone ancestral lands ranged from the Snake River Valley in Idaho to Salt Lake Valley in Utah, across most of eastern and central Nevada, and into Death Valley and the Mojave Desert in California.

Tribal members' fight to retain the land included the high-profile efforts of two aging sisters, Mary and Carrie Dann, who grazed their horses for decades without paying fees on federal land in northeast Nevada they contended belonged to the Western Shoshone. The Bureau of Land Management finally seized the horses in 2003.