

Tribes to take over injection wells

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation will become the nation’s first to take the place of the federal government in regulating a type of well associated with oil and natural gas development, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Monday.

The EPA has authorized Fort Peck’s Assiniboine and Sioux tribes to take over administration of a program — as some state governments have done — that is intended to prevent injection wells from harming underground sources of drinking water. The Montana tribes, rather than the federal government, will issue permits for the wells, which are used for below-ground disposal of salty water and sometimes are injected with fluids to enhance recovery of oil and gas. The tribes will be responsible for enforcing the permits’ conditions.

In the Southwest, the EPA has approved a Navajo tribal application to administer an injection-well program. That transfer of authority covering hundreds of wells would take effect later this year, after the effective date of Nov. 26 on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana.

Shifting authority from EPA to the tribes “is a recognition of tribal capacity and sovereignty that paves the way for other tribes with the technical ability to manage this important program,” Steve Tuber, the agency’s assistant regional administrator in Denver, said in a statement issued Monday. The Fort Peck tribal staff includes a petroleum engineer and a hydrologist, said Deb Madison of the tribal environmental office.

Use of injection wells for salty water is a disposal method that EPA generally finds easier on the environment than methods using water or pits above ground. Injection wells also may be used for storage of hydrocarbons.

The Fort Peck reservation has 24 wells of the type covered by the EPA decision, and most are 3,500 to 4,000 feet deep, Madison said.

Fort Peck officials have said that having a tribally run program will appeal to well operators because it will shorten the time necessary to process permit applications. Processing time of weeks rather than months has been projected, said Douglas Minter at EPA’s regional office in Denver. Permit applications that EPA received from various sources became backlogged because there were so many, Minter said.

The work requires evaluations to determine that wells are designed and maintained properly, and that existing or potential sources of drinking water are not jeopardized. Concerns include leaky well casings through which fluids could pass and enter underground sources of drinking water.

The EPA, which received little public comment on the Fort Peck regulatory proposal, will oversee tribal administration of the injection-well program on the reservation.

The tribes are to receive about \$20,000 to \$25,000 in federal funds with which to implement their work. To obtain more money, the tribes have the option of attaching fees to wells, something the state does to help fund its regulatory work.

Zunis dance for Santo Niño

By Ernie Bulow
For the Independent

ZUNI — Two large and colorful groups of Harvest Dancers took turns in the dance plaza behind the Nuestra Señora de La Candelaria Mission Church in the heart of the Zuni Pueblo Saturday in honor of the Santo Niño.

The social dance featured women wearing traditional dress; mantas, wrapped buckskin leggings and mocasins. The men wore velvet or satin shirts with full sleeves, decorated with satin ribbons. The dance leaders carried tall decorated poles and a group of singers surround the drummer.

Each group performed four times, and men and women from the audience would join in from time to time, dancing along with their participating family members. For the finale, the two groups merged and filled the old village with color and sound. The Harvest Dance was sponsored by Zuni Gov. Norman Cooyate and his council.

This is one of the occasions when the Lincoln cane, the governor’s symbol of office, makes a public appearance. The councilors carry duplicate canes created some years ago. The shaded portico where the politicians were seated to watch the ceremony was festooned with shawls, pumpkins and evergreen boughs. Members of the village took advantage of the gathering to encourage voting.

Several pueblo villages have Santo Niño figures dating back to early colonial times when the Spanish tried to supplant traditional Native religion with Catholicism. When the pueblos revolted in 1680 many priests were killed and the mission churches at Zuni and elsewhere were burned down. The Zunis saved a number of religious objects including a set of vestments and the Santo Niño doll. Santo Niño literally means “holy boy child” and refers to the infant Jesus. Because the figure is clothed in a dress, the Zuni have always considered it a girl.

In Zuni tradition the baby Jesus was



Ernie Bulow/For the Independent

A dance for Santo Niño of the Pueblo of Zuni was Saturday and most of the pueblo participated. The house where the Santo Nino calls home is in need of a new roof and some renovation.

transformed into a girl child, the daughter of the Sun. She was originally a living child, but contention between villages turned her into a mannequin. She continues to perform miracles for the village, running around under cover of darkness, regularly wearing out her shoes. It has been the job of a single family to care for the figure ever since the Spanish days.

Santo Nino has received quite a bit of publicity in the last year because the woman who cares for her needed help

renovating the crumbling old house that has been Santo Niño’s home for the last 400 years. By tradition, the child would be honored around New Year’s with an honor guard of the old “caciques” or tribal leaders with their muskets and traditional dress.

The doll would be ritually washed, given a new suit of clothes, prayed over, and carried through the village. The prayers have been forgotten and that particular ceremony is no longer performed. The Santo is still revered, how-

ever, and the Harvest Dance is dedicated to her. The culmination of the ceremony is a huge giveaway by the governor, his councilors, and their families. Gifts of bread, sweets, fruit, pumpkins, cloth goods, and all sorts of staples are thrown to the waiting audience. One lady was carrying a live turkey in her arms.

After the giveaway the dancers moved to the house of the Santo to sing and dance for her. Several Zunis said that this year’s ceremony had the biggest group of participants they had ever seen.

Tribe looks to boost voting numbers

By Patricia Ecker
Mount Pleasant Morning Sun

MOUNT PLEASANT, Mich. — Sovereignty and pride are the reasons Native Americans choose to identify themselves as members of their respective tribes by their tribally issued identification cards.

The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, one of 12 federally recognized tribes in Michigan, is encouraging its members to go to the polls with their own voter registration cards, but they are concerned Isabella County township clerks may not recognize or accept them.

“I look at this as a federal identification, like a passport when you go across to Canada,” Joe Sowmick, spokesman for the Tribe, said. “This is considered a valid ID that is recognized by the state and the federal government.

“A lot of people are aware that Tribal members have Tribal ID.”

The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, as part of the

Native Vote 2008 effort by the National Congress of American Indians, has been encouraging its members to make their votes count at the polls this year.

Tribal members have been encouraged to vote and issued Tribal voter registration cards.

“It’s a sense of pride,” Sowmick said. “You can see the Tribe’s logo around, and it is a lot more prevalent than it used to be.

“It’s a way of looking at Tribal identity in a positive manner.”

Su Lantz is the NCAI, Michigan Native Vote state lead, and she said a lot of people in Native American communities do not carry any other identification than their tribal ID.

“In 2004, a lawsuit was filed by the National Congress of American Indians and the Native American Bar Association to get Tribal IDs accepted for federally recognized tribes with a photo,” Lantz said. “One of the reasons they brought the suit is that many for many Natives, that’s the only ID they

carry.

“It’s important at the state level that they accept your ID.”

Lantz, a member of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa, said that although Michigan Native Americans do not reside on reservation lands as much as they do in the Dakota region (the Isabella reservation being an exception) many don’t want to be a part of the “white man’s system, and they hang on to their Tribal ID very tightly.”

“In Indian country, we’ve done a lot to get the vote out,” Lantz said. “It’s difficult to estimate the number of registered Native voters because nobody wants to give up their enrollment lists.

“We’re hoping that the VAN (voter activation network) will be able to track the number of Natives who are and are not registered to vote.”

Lantz said there are Tribal elders in her Petoskey community who have made a pact that they will never vote.

“A lot of people, who are veterans from war, have the

tendency not to register,” Lantz said. “They were in the Vietnam and Korea Wars, and they made a pact that they’re never going to vote.

“These are things we need to overcome.”

The NCAI said Native Americans often don’t register to vote because they either don’t know how, don’t think they can, or they simply forget.

Lantz said there are not reservations in Michigan with a precinct on it, but they have been funded by Michigan Voice, to provide mobilization for voters.

“Some communities have offered their casino shuttle busses to get people to the polls,” Lantz said. “We watch for things like unregistered voters, to see that tribal id’s are accepted, for faulty machines, and people being provided with misinformation.

“We keep track of these incidents, and of the nice things too.”

The Native Vote presence will be seen at voting precincts throughout Isabella County,

Lantz said.

She said members of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe have volunteered to go to the polls, and “Tribal Council asked Public Relations Manager Frank Cloutier to spearhead the effort.”

“We’re there to offer election protection,” Lantz said. “

Cloutier will act as Tribal coordinator for Native Vote 2008.

“It’s about self pride,” he said. “We are viable members of the community, and we are fortunate that with what the Native Vote effort has brought us, empowerment.”

Cloutier said the Native Vote program has kept the Tribe focused on the importance of their membership’s votes on Election Day.

“We have gaming, and we are an economic powerhouse in Michigan,” Cloutier said. “Every Native citizen should put more emphasis on their vote.

“We are people of position now.”

Tribe betting on its own gambling plans

By Matt Wickenheiser
Portland Press Herald

INDIAN ISLAND, Maine — You’d think members of Penobscot Indian Nation would be keenly interested in the Nov. 4 ballot question that would legalize a casino in Oxford County.

For years, they’ve pushed unsuccessfully to expand their gambling operations in the state beyond the high-stakes bingo they operate on their reservation here.

Voters statewide turned down a 2003 proposal backed by the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy tribes to operate a tribal casino in Sanford. This spring, Gov. John Baldacci — who has consistently opposed gambling initiatives — vetoed a bill that would have allowed the Penobscots to operate slots on Indian Island, in conjunction with their bingo games.

But Penobscot Chief Kirk Francis said he considered the pending Oxford County vote to be “kind of insignificant,” though at one point earlier in the year, the tribe was in talks to take over that campaign.

Frustrated with the veto, the legislative process and what the tribe views as a lack of recognition of tribal sovereignty, the Penobscots say they are moving toward severing their relationship with the state.

They’ve told the state to stay off tribal lands. They held their own lottery for moose licenses this year to hunt on the 150,000 acres the Penobscots own.

And they’re moving ahead with plans to put slots on Indian Island, with a Taiwanese manufacturer now modifying slot machines so they’re legal under state law as the tribe believes it applies to the

Penobscot Nation. Francis said he has a 35-page legal position drafted by two former Maine attorneys general, whom he would not identify, that interprets how the state’s gambling laws apply to the tribe.

The Penobscots believe the slot machines would be an internal tribal matter, as long as the money is going to tribal operations, said Francis. He declined to elaborate on how the machines are being modified, or on the legal interpretation they’ve developed.

Sometime in the next three to four months, the tribe expects to make its plans public.

“We have gambling aspirations,” Francis said. “We expect that’s going to be a very contentious situation.”

The tribe doesn’t want to be seen as renegade, Francis said. And the people of Maine “won’t look at outright law-

lessness as a respectable act.” Francis declined to discuss the specifics of the plans any further.

David Farmer, Baldacci’s deputy chief of staff, said the administration didn’t have any specific information about what the tribe was doing to modify slot machines.

“What I can say is that state law applies to the entire state and if they move forward with some sort of plan based on slot machine gambling, it would be necessary to look at that in a consistent legal framework across the state,” said Farmer. “Eventually, I imagine, it would fall to the attorney general and the courts to determine if they’re breaking the law. You can’t have two systems of law when it comes to things as important and consequential as gambling.”

Though the Oxford County casino question is “insignificant,” said Francis, the Penob-

scots are watching it. While the tribe supports casino gambling in the state, it is concerned over language in the referendum question that would put a moratorium on new casinos for 10 years.

“I don’t think that’s good for Maine, and it certainly goes against what our future plans are,” said Francis.

Wayne Mitchell, the tribe’s newly elected representative to the Maine Legislature, said he hasn’t heard a lot of talk in the community about the Oxford County vote.

“From my own personal perspective, I’m just watching,” said Mitchell. “We’ve already been slapped down twice.”

He added, “We have to move on, we’ve got to provide for our people through economic development. We’re looking for ways to do that; we’ve got several things going on.”