

NATIVE AMERICAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Plenary presentation given by T. Williams, Director, Office of Indian Affairs, U.S. EPA, 401 M Street SW, Mail Stop 4101, Washington, DC 20460

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ABSTRACT

Terry Williams (Puyallup tribe) was asked by Carol Browner, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator, to head the Office of Indian Affairs at U.S. EPA. Williams uses his personal experience as an Indian tribal member to determine areas of focus for his office. Williams will work with 13 staff members to ensure that EPA's existing Native American programs serve tribes in meaningful ways. Williams has found broad support within EPA for his work. Williams gave a brief history of U.S. legislation that has strongly affected tribes.

KEY WORDS

Native American, Indian, Environmental Protection Agency, tribes

INTRODUCTION

Terry Williams (Puyallup tribe), new head of the Office of Indian Affairs at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has established three areas of focus for his office: (1) giving Indian people jurisdiction over their lands; (2) building the capacities of Indian people to manage their lands through resources from EPA; and (3) helping tribes understand environmental conditions on their lands, through training and education. In 1994, out of a \$7 billion total budget, EPA designated \$35 million specifically for tribes. In 1995, \$55 million has been designated for tribes, and Williams anticipates further increases in 1996 and 1997.

Williams is enrolled in a tribe that has a strong fishing tradition, but the amount of salmon in the Northwest U.S. is declining. While tribes used to live totally off the land, Williams has seen on a personal level how industrial and other activities have made it difficult to impossible for tribes to live even marginally off the land today. Williams

stated that people have eliminated 90% of the sustainable resources in the U.S. and are living off of an artificial ecosystem.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN INDIAN LEGISLATION

Williams gave a brief history of U.S. legislation regarding tribes in order to show the changes that tribes have been forced to undergo and how these changes have affected tribes and tribal lands. Williams highlighted the Allotment Act, the Indian Citizenship Act and the Termination Act.

The Dawes General Allotment Act (also called the Dawes Severalty Act) was passed February 8, 1887. The Allotment Act called for the distribution of tribally-held reservation land to individual tribal members. The purpose of the distribution was to force Indians to assimilate into American society by becoming farmers. A head of household was allotted 160 acres, and an unmarried adult was allotted 80 acres. The final bill that passed included a provision that any land remaining after the allotment

would be made available to the non-Indian public.

The effect of allotment on Indian people was devastating. The farming life was totally foreign to a people who had been nomadic for centuries. When the allotment process was finished, tribes had lost 2/3 of the land that they had held prior to the Act. There were several factors that contributed to this huge loss of land: the land remaining after allotment was sold or leased to non-Indians; some of the allotted land was lost to taxes because allotted land that was farmed was heavily taxed by the states; the government demanded that some of the allotted land be sold to give rights of way for railroads and telegraph lines; and non-Indian land speculators used underhanded means to gain access to allotted lands—some purchased inheritance rights or gained guardianship over Indian children who would inherit land.

The Indian Citizenship Act was passed in 1924. It granted citizenship to all Indians although New Mexico, Arizona and Maine withheld the right to vote until after World War II. As with the Allotment Act, the ultimate goal of the Citizenship Act was assimilation. The Citizenship Act did serve to heighten Indian rights.

Although the 1930s and 40s were marked by some progressive policies towards Indians, the U.S. once again took a coercive assimilationist stance in the 1950s and 60s. During this time, Congress considered many bills which called for the end of Indian reservations although none were passed. In 1952, the Voluntary Relocation Program provided counseling and guidance to Indians who would relocate to urban centers. The Termination Resolution, which was passed in 1953, provided for the termination of the federal-Indian trust relationship. From 1954 to 1962 Congress terminated the trust relationship with 61 tribes. The Menominee tribe was one of the largest among these.

Termination was presented to the tribes as a good thing because it would give them freedom from federal intervention. In reality, however, termination served to further deprive Indian people of their land. Tribal members lost land due to the new property taxes, and this land was bought by private companies who wanted the timber on Menominee lands. Eventually, the federal trust relationship was restored with the Menominees because of lobbying of Congress. The Ottawas, Wyandots, Peorias and Modocs also regained a federal-Indian trust relationship.

CONCLUSION

Past U.S. policies have separated Indian tribes from the land base that they need in order to preserve their way of life. Williams, EPA and the EPA Office of Indian Affairs are working to protect Native Americans from further exploitation and to foster self-determination for tribes.

REFERENCES

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