

Tribe sues to protect ancient maze

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A Native American tribe has filed a lawsuit against a California agency over a groundwater cleanup plan near Needles, claiming it is harming an ancient maze that members believe is critical for spirits to get to the afterlife.

The lawsuit filed in Sacramento last week is part of a years-long dispute between the Fort Mojave Indian tribe, the Department of Toxic Substances Control and Pacific Gas & Electric. The utility is named as a real party of interest in this latest suit.

The tribe filed its original lawsuit in 2005 to protect the Topock Maze and a year later entered into a settlement agreement with the state agency and utility.

As part of the agreement, the utility and state agency apologized for desecrating the sacred site and pledged to remove a \$15 million water treatment plant as

soon as another could be built. In exchange, the 1,200 member tribe agreed to drop the suit.

Attorneys for the tribe say the agency is in violation of the settlement agreement.

The lawsuit is asking for the agency to remove the plant or justify why it must remain and to revise the cleanup plan's environmental impact report to take into consideration the tribe's concerns. The tribe is also asking for the agency to provide mitigation measures for the potential harm that the cleanup could cause.

"Instead of the polluter paying for the damage, it'll end up being the tribe's religious practices and cultural values that take the hit and that's not right," said attorney Courtney Ann Coyle. "PG&E and DTSC can do better."

Charlotte Fadipe, a spokeswoman for the state toxics agency, said they do not comment on ongoing litigation.

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The maze, which is a pattern of pebble berms and furrows, forms a series of lines that tribal ancestors are believed to have used as a place of purification or a pathway for their spirits to reach the afterlife.

The site which is located near Needles, about four hours east of Los Angeles, is believed to be hundreds of years old and is on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Much of it has been destroyed by development but about a third of it remains.

The water treatment plant

began operations in July 2005 and was built to clean groundwater under a natural gas compressor station that had been contaminated with cancer-causing hexavalent chromium. PG&E had dumped an estimated 198 million gallons of contaminated water into the ground from 1951 to 1969.

State officials were concerned that the contaminated groundwater could eventually make its way to the Colorado River and the drinking water supply for millions of people in Southern California and Arizona.

PG&E spokesman Jeff Smith said their goal is to continue to work with the tribe towards a solution.

"Certainly we do regret our historical operations that caused the chromium 6 contamination in the Topock area and that's why we're committed to remediating the area and cleaning it up," he said.

Tribe's investment since track purchase tops \$15M

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A subsidiary of the Chickasaw Nation plans to unveil its multimillion dollar refurbishment of Remington Park on Thursday, a day before the start of the track's quarter horse meet, including an infield video board with what track officials describe as the largest at any American racetrack with a casino.

When Remington Park opened in 1988, it was considered a crown jewel among U.S. horse-racing tracks, but it fell into disrepair before Global Gaming RP LLC, a subsidiary of the Oklahoma-based American Indian tribe, bought it 14 months ago. When the company applied for a racing license, it promised the Oklahoma Horse Racing Commission it would spend \$12 million on refurbishment.

Global Gaming CEO John Elliott said the Chickasaw Nation's gaming arm has spent more than \$15 million on Remington Park since buying it in January 2010 from bankrupt Magna Entertainment Corp. for \$80.25 million.

"We've approached it as an entertainment facility," Elliott told The Associated Press. "The more amenities, the more entertainment you've got for people, the more likely you are to get them out here."

State regulators and local horsemen had high hopes for Remington Park and its casino under Global Gaming's ownership because of the Ada-based tribe's local roots and its success in operating casinos elsewhere in Oklahoma. Those expectations have been exceeded, said Constantin Rieger, the executive director of the state racing commission.

"I have to say, as a regulator, everything they told us they were going to do has already happened at warp speed," Rieger said. "They are continuing to upgrade the facility, to make it as aesthetically pleasing to patrons as they can."

In 2010, Remington Park set an attendance record, drawing 1,756,616 fans. Total wagering on thoroughbred racing at the track last year was \$54,179,243, a

jump of 48.3 percent compared to 2009.

It's no secret the racing industry is struggling in many parts of the U.S. and Remington Park's success under Global Gaming is gaining notice, Rieger said. Along with the new ownership, he credited the passage of State Question 712 in 2004, which allowed for casinos at Oklahoma racetracks in an attempt to keep them financially viable.

"People see the numbers, obviously," he said. "They call and ask, 'What the heck is going on?' I just said, 'Whatever was supposed to happen, it's coming to fruition.' It's taken somebody to say, 'We're going to make this happen.' This group is strong enough and committed enough to get it done."

Remington Park's success "is an anomaly, but it's wonderful," Rieger said.

The new video board touts a 30-foot-tall by 60-foot-wide main screen and a 17-foot-tall by 60-foot-wide second screen, giving Remington Park more than 3,100 square feet of video display space. Track officials say the big screen, made by Daktronics, is the largest at a North American racetrack that has a casino.

"It's gorgeous," said Scott Wells, the track's general manager. "It's going to heighten the entertainment. In today's world, people expect a video presentation to be part of their entertainment when they go to a sporting event. We've been working for months on programming and content and how to maximize its use."

As recently as this week, crews were pulling out television sets that dated to the track's opening, replacing them with large flat-screen models. Major renovations have started on the track's clubhouse level and on the ground floor, the current concession area is being transformed into a Mexican food eatery. Elliott said plans still remain to build a hotel at the track within a few years, but Global Gaming's initial concern was bringing the physical plant up to what the company deems an acceptable level.

Luther enjoys film success on festival circuit

PARK CITY, Utah (AP) — Excitement was in the air as hundreds filed into theatres at the Sundance Film Festival for special screenings of films directed and produced by Native Americans from the Four Corners region.

Just hours before the screenings began, Park City, Utah, was buzzing with speculation on how "Grab" and "The Rocket Boy" would be received by journalists from around the world.

Billy Luther, 35, who directed "Grab," said he grew up without seeing any images of Native Americans on television or the big screen. Luther is part Navajo, Hopi and Laguna and has family members who live in Forest Lake, a small community west of Chinle, Ariz., on the vast Navajo reservation.

"A lot of artists create from struggle, pain or suffering. Not me. The film is about the 'grab day' celebration that happens year-round in pueblo communities," Luther explained just prior to a screening.

"My documentary explores the Laguna Pueblo community. The film follows

three families as they live and work around their community, preparing for this event."

"Grab" is Luther's second independent film to premiere at Sundance.

The film graduate of Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., debuted "Miss Navajo" in 2007 at the festival. Luther said "Miss Navajo" was inspired by his mother's life growing up during the 1960s. Luther's mother, Sarah Ann Johnson Luther, was Miss Navajo from 1966-67.

The film went on to win famed producer Michael Moore's Special Founders Prize.

"Miss Navajo" also won Best Indigenous Film at the Santa Fe Film Festival and is the centerpiece of an upcoming stage production called "Miss Navajo: The Musical."

"Miss Navajo world-premiered at Sundance in 2007. It was kind of a different experience then. Now I'm much more calm and relaxed about it all," said Luther of the second time around.

Luther said he's elated he chose filmmaking as a profession. He said his relationship with Sundance started in 2006 when he was selected to participate in a Sundance Institute/

Ford Foundation Fellowship.

"I wouldn't be doing anything else," he said. "Sitting behind a desk and working from 9 to 5 would irritate me. I waited tables and did the retail thing throughout college. I'd write a lot when I was working. Waiting tables with many creative people was a highlight. We (fellow filmmakers) can now look back and think about how much more we were struggling back then. I think waiting tables also helps you see into people—good and bad. Rude, bad tippers, ego freaks and the fun outgoing ones, too. Meeting so many crazies gave me a lot of material to work with in my writing."

At the Jan. 24 screening of "Grab," Luther thanked his mentor, N. Bird Runningwater, associate director of Sundance's Native American and Indigenous Initiative, which provides a developmental platform for Native American filmmakers.

"Grab" showcases the time of the year when residents of Laguna, about 25 miles east of Grants, N.M., pay tribute to family members by throwing food and gifts from the rooftops of their homes to residents. The film follows three different Laguna families.

"I don't make films to win awards. You never remember who won the year before and it only ends up in your bio or some image on your DVD cover," Luther said. "I don't think the average film watcher goes to see films just because they won an award. Maybe they do. But I bet a lot of them are disappointed after they watch it."

"Sundance is fun because I get to reconnect with filmmakers and friends I've known for the past 10 years since I've been attending. There is nothing better than being cold and waiting in line at 8 a.m. to see a film with a group of friends," Luther said.

"The Rocket Boy" also screened at Sundance was created by three young Navajo filmmakers and was one of seven such films premiering during the festival's Indigenous Shorts Showcase series. The film is directed by Donavan Seschillie, 22, the youngest Native American director in Sundance history, festival officials said. The 30th annual Sundance Film Festival, founded by actor Robert Redford, ended Jan. 30.

New tribal relations secretary pushes for unity

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's new secretary of tribal relations says he wants to continue the process of reconciliation between the state's American Indian and non-Indian populations.

Leroy "J.R." LaPlante was appointed to the new Cabinet-level position by Gov. Dennis Daugaard. LaPlante tells the Rapid City Journal that he was inspired by former Gov. George Mickelson's "Year of Reconciliation" two decades ago.

LaPlante is a 42-year-old native of the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation. He says his department can look for partnerships and ways to maximize resources on impoverished reservations like Cheyenne River, which includes Ziebach County, the poorest county in the United States.

Daugaard said earlier this month that LaPlante's appointment is part of a larger effort to connect with tribes. The governor says he has "a lot to learn" about American Indians.

Students to assist Lumbee

PEMBROKE, N.C. (AP) — Students from Wake Forest University School of Law are spending their spring break providing legal assistance to members of the Lumbee Indian Tribe.

A group of law students will travel to Pembroke starting Monday, and will work with Legal Aid to help members of the tribe and other area residents.

The students plan to hold a legal clinic for an Indian military veterans group along with other services.

The spring break trip continues work began last fall, when the law school's Pro Bono Project launched the Pembroke Legal Services student group.

That group is committed to providing free legal assistance to members of the Lumbee tribe.

State may act on school nickname

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A North Dakota Senate committee has scheduled a hearing on legislation to require the University of North Dakota to keep its Fighting Sioux nickname.

The bill would require the University of North Dakota to

keep its Fighting Sioux nickname and an American Indian head logo. The Board of Higher Education has ordered UND to retire the name and logo, and the school is planning to do that in August. The board is opposing the bill.

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