

Thornburgh resort again denied approval

Water supply in the region has been key issue for the Confederated Tribes

The developers of a controversial resort proposed for Central Oregon again were again handed a setback in the attempt to tap the Deschutes River Basin.

Most recently, the Deschutes County Circuit Court dismissed Thornburgh Resort's attempt to overturn an earlier denial of a previous limited water use license application.

The proposed 2,000-acre Thornburgh Resort is located about 20 miles north of Bend. The development would include 950 single-family homes, private lakes, a luxury hotel and two golf courses.

In its latest decision, the court upheld the Oregon Water Resources Department ruling that the

Deschutes River Basin, drier than it has been in the past three decades, is too low to accommodate the requested siphoning.

Thornburgh's developers have been trying to finance and permit the development since the early 2000s. Thornburgh has water rights and approved transfers that provide water for its phase A development plans, according to the developers.

In 2023, the Oregon Water Resources Department denied the developers' request to build wells.

The region has been dealing with water shortages, and the need for deeper and deeper wells, for years. Drilling deeper wells requires permitting and money that many people don't have.

According to a 2017 study from the U.S. Geological Survey, groundwater in the central part

of the Upper Deschutes Basin—from Sisters to Powell Butte—dipped as much as 14 feet between 1997 and 2008.

Leaders of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs have for years voiced concerns about how Thornburgh would affect treaty rights, and the tribes' most senior water right.

The tribes last year won an Oregon Court of Appeals ruling that found the state Land Use Board Appeals had made a mistake by earlier dismissing tribal opposition to a Deschutes County approval.

Then most recently, on March 31, Deschutes County Circuit Court ruled that the Oregon Water Resources Department was "rational, fair and principled" in its denial of a limited water-use license application by Thornburgh.

BLM effort to repatriate human remains

In the early 1960s, human remains were discovered near what is now Lake Billy Chinook, and are believed to be of Native American descent.

The Bureau of Land Management in Prineville is now seeking to return these remains to the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

The remains are currently held at the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History.

In 1962, Portland General Electric contracted with the University of Oregon to survey what is now Lake Billy Chinook, because the area would be covered in water after the Pelton Dam was created.

During that process, human remains were found in the area and have been stored at the University of Oregon.

"We feel that the remains that were found in 1962 do belong to one of the Native American tribes that moved in or lived in Central Oregon back in the day," said Lisa Clark, BLM-Prineville field manager.

"We're doing our best to try to figure out who these human remains should be returned to."

As part of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, NAGPRA, there's been an evaluation of remains across the country.

The NAGPRA process is a Federal law passed in 1990, proving processes for museums and federal agencies to return certain Native American cultural items to Indian tribes.

NAGPRA authorizes Federal grants to Indian tribes and museums to assist with documenting and repatriating Native American cultural items.

NAGPRA establishes a committee to monitor the process and fa-

"...once we found (the collection), it's absolutely our honor and responsibility to get the ancestor returned to who it belongs to."

Lisa Clark, BLM Prineville

Facilitate the resolution of disputes that may arise concerning repatriation. Violations of NAGPRA are addressed through criminal and civil enforcement.

BLM has recently been working to have the remains returned. The land was BLM at the time the remains were collected, but is now Ochoco National Forest.

"Due to some land changes over the years, we weren't aware we had that collection," Ms. Clark.

"But once we found it, it's absolutely our honor and responsibility to get this ancestor returned to who it belongs to."

She says they believe the human remains belong to a local Central Oregon tribe.

"Given the time of collection, given the age, perhaps, of the human remains that were located, it gives kind of an indication of that something more ancient or if it's something recent and that kind of gives you a clue of the path that you want to take," she said.

Based on Lake Billy Chinook's location, it makes sense that the Warm Springs Reservation might have the lineal descendants of the human remains. Clark said BLM has had initial conversations with the tribe and they support the action BLM is taking.

"However, we do know that tribes move through areas, and so

part of the process is to do a federal Register notice, which acts for anybody who feels they might have a claim on these remains to step forward and provide that information," Clark said.

The published Federal Register Notice is the outreach to ensure all tribes have an opportunity to determine if they have a claim on the human remains.

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For more info contact Jillisa Suppah
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