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US House Approves Funding for Three Indian Water Rights Settlements; Now Await President's Pen

(SANTA FE, New Mexico) -- The U.S. House of Representatives on Tuesday approved a key piece of legislation that resolves Indian Water Rights claims in New Mexico, as well as other water rights issues.

The U.S. Senate approved the bill earlier in November. The House approved the legislation by a vote of 256 to 152.

The legislation included Nambe-Pojoaque-Tesuque Valley litigation known as the *Aamodt* case, which has been unsettled for more than 40 years. Also in the bill is settlement funding for the Taos Pueblo water-rights claims (known as the *Abeyta* case) and direct funding of \$180 million for a Navajo-Gallup pipeline, which is part of a Navajo Water Rights Settlement in New Mexico.

The bill provides direct funding of \$81.8 million for the *Aamodt* agreement, which includes building a new Rio Grande diversion and a pipeline to deliver water to the Pojoaque Basin area. The bill also provides direct funding of \$66 million for the Taos Pueblo Water Rights Settlement. It authorizes \$92 million in future for the *Aamodt* Settlement and \$58 million for the *Abeyta* Settlement.

The three water rights settlements will receive more than \$478 million.

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"The support of our New Mexico's U.S. Congressional delegation should be applauded," said New Mexico State Engineer John D'Antonio. "Representatives Martin Heinrich and Ben Ray Lujan were key players in passage of this legislation that will benefit many New Mexicans. I am optimistic that President Obama will sign this bill into law. Now it is up to the New Mexico State Legislature to use the funding tools available via the Indian Water Rights Settlement Fund, the Water Trust Board, and the recently passed Indian Infrastructure funding bill that becomes effective in 2012."

"This is a huge achievement for the State of New Mexico as these settlements provide certainty of water rights for Indians as well as non-Indians," said D'Antonio. "It also provides future economic benefits by creating jobs to build water infrastructure for critical drinking water needs."

The legislation was included in a package of bills that also settled Native American water rights claims in Montana and Arizona as well as settling United States' outstanding liability obligations to tribal members across the nation in the Cobell litigation and for farmers in the Pigford litigation.

The Office of the State Engineer is charged with administering the state's water resources. The State Engineer has power over the supervision, measurement, appropriation, and distribution of all surface and groundwater in New Mexico, including streams and rivers that cross state boundaries. The State Engineer is also Secretary of the Interstate Stream Commission.

The nine-member Interstate Stream Commission is charged with separate duties including protection New Mexico's right to water under eight interstate stream compacts, ensuring the state complies with each of those compacts as well as investigating, conserving and protecting the waters of the state, in addition to water planning.

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