



Feds Revoke Tribe's Status

July 06, 2002 12:00 am • By Amy McFall Prince

The U.S. Department of the Interior Friday revoked last year's decision to grant the Chinook Indians official recognition, dealing a blow to a tribe that has sought the status for nearly a quarter century.

The announcement came at the tail of a week in which Chinook Tribal Chairman Gary Johnson attended meetings and luncheons in Washington, D.C., in which President George W. Bush commemorated the Lewis and Clark bicentennial.

The Chinooks are credited with meeting the Lewis and Clark expedition, which reached the mouth of the Columbia River in the fall of 1805.

"The Bush administration doesn't recognize us, but they invite our chairman back to celebrate Lewis and Clark," Chinook Vice Chairman Norris Petit noted Friday.

Petit called the reversal a political dispute with a long-time enemy, the Quinalts, who the Chinooks say want to keep control of a timber-rich reservation in Grays Harbor and Jefferson counties.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs had granted the Chinooks recognition in January 2001, a finding that gave the tribe access to federal health and education assistance and the opportunity to buy land and start businesses.

But the Quinault Indian Nation, with whom the Chinooks and others share reservation land, in August last year appealed the BIA's decision.

The department said its decision was reversed because the Chinooks, which count 2,000 tribal members, failed to meet three requirements: maintaining political influence, comprising a social community and being identified as a tribe on a regular basis. In effect, the BIA found that for a while at least the tribe did not exist as a tribe.

Portland's Lewis and Clark College history professor Stephen Dow Beckham said the reversal is a throwback to decades-old attitudes against American Indians.

"The Bureau's position is bankrupt," he said. "They deny the existence of reality and the law."

Beckham, who has researched the Chinook for 23 years, said thousands of documents written throughout history, as well as U.S. Supreme Court cases, can prove the Chinook were an organized and recognized group.

To fight the decision, Beckham said the tribe could file a lawsuit or lobby their U.S. congressional delegation to submit a bill that would officially recognize them.

The BIA's decision is the second time the agency has reversed itself on Chinook tribal status. The bureau always recognized that there was a Chinook tribe when Capt. Robert Gray sailed into the Columbia River in 1792 and when Lewis and Clark arrived 13 years later. But in 1997 the BIA concluded that the tribe had dispersed in the 19th century and ceased to function as a political entity after 1855, when the U.S. government failed to get the tribe to sign a treaty.

The BIA then reversed itself in January last year after the tribe submitted additional documentation and asked for reconsideration.

U.S. Rep. Brian Baird said Friday he asked his staff to contact tribal members to offer his help.

"I think this sets a terrible precedent," he said. "I'd hoped the Chinook people had made a strong-enough case."

Beckham said one of the most disturbing parts of the reversal is that many of Chinook members own land on the Quinault reservation, for which the BIA holds their land in trust. This, he said, proves the federal government recognizes the Chinooks as a tribe.

Petit agrees.

"They're holding our land in trust, but they're saying 'You're not Indian.' They don't recognize us," he said. "It's like a double-edged sword."