



June 8, 2012 – *Silver City Sun-News* - [Fort Sill Apache Tribe's Akela Flats casino proposal ignites turf war](#)

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AKELA FLATS - It's a 30-acre tract along Interstate 10 with a temporary building where travelers can stop for a burger and beer. It's also the nation's newest Indian reservation, designated as such last year for the Fort Sill Apache.

But as the tribe moves forward with controversial plans to use the reservation to build a casino that could capture truckers and drivers ready for a break halfway between Los Angeles and Dallas, it has reignited old turf wars with the state and with other tribes concerned about competition for gamblers.

The tribe recently won a first hurdle in its quest to build the casino with a ruling from the Bureau of Indian Affairs that the 30 acres the tribe has been trying to develop into a gambling operation for years is indeed eligible.

But the roadside reservation is only big enough for a casino and possibly a hotel, raising questions about the tribe's sincerity in seeking the reservation status as part of its quest to return to its New Mexico homelands.

Fort Sill Apache Tribal Chairman Jeff Haozous says it's a bit of chicken-and-egg question. The tribe, currently based in southwest Oklahoma, needs the casino to get income to buy more land to help its members return, he said.

"The goal is to repatriate the tribe," Haozous said. "Obviously that would require more than 30 acres. But that would also require more economic resources. With more resources, we can buy more land and develop more businesses."

The Fort Sill Apache Tribe has roughly 685 members.

Gov. Susana Martinez opposes the casino, saying the tribe agreed it would not attempt to build a casino in Akela Flats when the land was put into trust about 10 years ago.

The head of the BIA office in Albuquerque last month sent a letter seeking comment on the proposed casino from the governor and local elected officials in southern New Mexico, as well as the Mescalero Apache tribe and the Isleta Pueblo, which operate the two Indian casinos closest to Akela Flats.

Frank Lujan, governor of the Isleta Pueblo south of Albuquerque, said he is unsure whether his or other New Mexico tribes will support the Fort Sill Apache proposal.

"Everybody has a different take on it," he said. "In a sense yes, in a sense no. It's kind of like one of these things where we want all Native Americans to succeed. At the same time, we are in competition."

Lujan said the casino is far enough south of Albuquerque, about 200 miles, that it's not as big of a concern for his tribe as it likely is for the Mescalero Apache, who run the Inn of the Mountain Gods hotel and casino in Ruidoso. That casino is the only tribal casino in southern New Mexico, and draws heavily on Texas gamblers.

Mescalero Apache officials did not return calls from The Associated Press, though the tribe has in the past opposed a separate attempt by the Jemez Pueblo to build an off-reservation casino in Anthony, N.M., which is close to El Paso, Texas.

Lujan, however, said he does not dispute the tribe's right to a reservation in Akela Flats, about 20 miles east of Deming.

"That is a good thing for them," Lujan said. "That is their homeland. That's where they came from. Any time you get back what you had, that's primary."

Bob Haozous, a Santa Fe artist who is the Fort Sill Apache chairman's cousin, has held a number of meetings around the state in recent months. He's hoping to get the governor, the other tribes and nearby communities to support the casino. Officials in Deming, which has one of the state's highest unemployment rates, have been supportive. But a spokesman for Martinez this week said her position has not changed.

Still, gaming officials say it's possible for the BIA to grant the reservation permission to operate a casino without Martinez's approval. Likewise, the state could go to court to fight the BIA if it does. That means the dispute, which first erupted when the tribe unsuccessfully tried to put gambling in its roadside trailer in the late '90s, could drag on for years.

Bob Haozous said the casino is overshadowing the real issue for the Fort Sill Apache Tribe, which is the legal successor of the Chiricahua, Warm Springs, Nednais and Bedonke bands of Apache Indians. They lived in southwestern New Mexico and Arizona until they were removed and made prisoners of war when Geronimo surrendered.

They were first taken to Florida, then to Alabama and finally Oklahoma, Bob Haozous said. He refers to the tribe's Oklahoma trust lands as their "prison camp."

"We haven't had a homeland since 1886," Bob Haozous said. "Before that, the whole area West of the Rio Grande was ours. ... My dream is that we get some economic incentive to start purchasing land and bringing people back."