



November 23, 2011 – Associated Press - [Fort Sill Apaches win reservation in New Mexico](#)

By JERI CLAUSING, Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — More than 125 years after the surrender of renowned Apache leader Geronimo scattered tribal members across the Southwest, the Fort Sill Apache have won the right to establish a reservation on homelands in southern New Mexico.

"This is what I see as the start of a long journey home," said Jeff Houser, chairman of the tribe whose headquarters are currently based in southwest Oklahoma.

The U.S. Interior Department earlier this month approved a proclamation that awards the Fort Sill Apache 30 acres to establish a reservation near Deming, he said. It comes four years after the federal government put the land on the Akela Flats in trust to settle a dispute between the tribe and the Comanche Nation in Oklahoma over the Fort Sill Apache's plans to expand their casino in Lawton, Okla.

The Fort Sill have a 10-acre headquarters in Oklahoma and 120 acres of farmland, Houser said, but no reservation.

The tribe's attorney, Phillip Thompson of Thompsons Associates in Washington, said he was unsure when the Bureau of Indian Affairs last created a new reservation.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Houser, who also uses the Apache spelling of his name, said the goal is to return the tribe to its ancestral homelands in New Mexico. And, ultimately, the tribe hopes to be able to build a casino on the site, he said.

"Given that the ultimate goal would be to return, that really requires a lot of resources," Houser said. "We could probably house all the tribal members that want to move there, but that would increase the unemployment rates in the county. If we build a casino, that could provide jobs."

The tribe's efforts to establish gaming on the land in the past were blocked. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act prohibits gambling on most tribal trust land acquired after 1988, but it contains an exemption for tribes who are being granted a reservation for the first time.

Thompson said the tribe is appealing the National Indian Gaming Commissions rejection of its past effort to build a casino on the site.

"We already argued this was our de facto reservation. This just solidifies what we already argued," he said. "We will probably just send a letter to the commission asked them to take notice."

Thompson said the tribe is also talking with state and federal officials about getting the necessary endorsements for the building a casino.

The reservation designation, he said, "solidifies our position that we are a New Mexico tribe and that as a New Mexico tribe we should have the same abilities as the tribes in the rest of the state to be able to game on our land."

Thompson said he was unsure when the last new Native American reservation was created, saying it happens occasionally but not often. The tribe, Houser said, has 685 members, about a quarter of whom live near tribal headquarters, another quarter live elsewhere and about half of whom live outside Oklahoma.

Houser said that while the proclamation gives the tribe just 30 acres, "hopefully we can expand our presence."

Asked if he would move tribal headquarters to New Mexico, Houser said, "that is not my decision. But that is my dream."

Members of the Fort Sill Apache Tribe are descended from the Chiricahua and Warm Springs Apaches, who lived in parts of New Mexico, Arizona and northern Mexico. They were removed from the area in the 1880s and sent first to Florida, then Oklahoma.

Houser said his ancestors would be proud of the tribe's efforts to return to New Mexico. His grandfather was born on the Ojo Caliente Reservation near Truth or Consequences in the 1800s, he said.

"Our many years of patience, persistence and dedication to returning to our homeland are evident in receipt of this Reservation Proclamation," Houser said in a statement. "This further confirms our status as an official Tribe in the state of New Mexico. We look forward to the day when our tribal sovereignty here is also fully recognized and we are equal to our fellow New Mexico sovereign tribes and pueblos."

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