

# Feds kill Barstow casino plan

The U.S. Interior Department may have put the final nail in the coffin for the Big Lagoon Rancheria's plans to build a major casino in Barstow, refocusing the rancheria on building a gaming facility at Big Lagoon.

Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs Carl Artman wrote in a Jan. 4 letter that the federal government would not take the 23-acre Barstow property into trust. The decision comes about three months after the rancheria largely abandoned its bid for a state compact, after two legislative sessions failed to produce it.

"It's been a final decision for us once we decided to build at Big Lagoon," said rancheria Chairman Virgil Moorehead.

Moorehead said that if a settlement isn't reached with the state by Feb. 4, the rancheria will likely go back to federal court with bad-faith negotiation charges to force the state to ratify a gaming compact for a casino at Big Lagoon in northern Humboldt County, or allow for an independent mediator to choose between different compacts. That could leave the Interior Department to approve or deny the compact.

Artman's letter explains the federal denial of the Barstow property as one made out of concern that the tribal members on the rancheria wouldn't realize employment benefits from a casino 550 miles away.

"A gaming operation on or close to the reservation would allow the tribe to alleviate this situation by using its gaming facility as a conduit for job training and employment problems for tribal members," Artman wrote.

Concerns about impacts on water quality, endangered species and scenery from a casino on serene Big Lagoon had state environmental agencies and conservation groups supporting the

Barstow compact. With that upended, and the tribe pushing harder for a casino on their reservation, a battle is likely over who approves the project. The California Coastal Commission has vowed to sue, claiming that states which adopt federally approved coastal programs have the right to review federal projects, like an Indian casino.

Moorehead maintains that the environmental analysis the rancheria has done, while not necessarily meeting California Environmental Quality Act standard, would allow for the effects of the project to be mitigated far beyond what other tribes have done on their reservations.