

RECLAMATION:

Agency rebuked for its handling of tribal remains, artifacts

Cecelia Smith-Schoenwalder, E&E reporter

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Native American remains and artifacts uncovered during federal irrigation projects haven't been returned to tribes as the law requires, according to an investigation by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel.

The probe followed a report from a former museum specialist at the Bureau of Reclamation's Sacramento, Calif., office who said the office failed to catalog new remains, track collections or notify tribes when an ancestral recovery was made. The museum specialist's disclosure was submitted to OSC by the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) requires that Native American remains and artifacts be inventoried and repatriated.

The former museum specialist, Patrick Williams, said in the filing with the Office of Special Counsel in 2013 that Reclamation was repeatedly in violation of NAGPRA.

Williams' disclosure had a "substantial likelihood of validity" in the view of OSC, which transferred it to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell in 2014. She asked Reclamation to respond.

Last week, the OSC in a [letter](#) to President Obama and Congress detailed its findings. Even though Reclamation has planned additional actions to promote NAGPRA compliance, "Mr. Williams is correct that full NAGPRA compliance remains 'a goal,' and is not yet reality," wrote OSC chief Carolyn Lerner.

Reclamation said it is cooperating with the OSC.

"As stated in the OSC's September 22nd letter to the President and Congress, Reclamation takes this matter seriously, is actively engaged in corrective steps and is making good progress," the statement said.

The bureau has a goal to be fully NAGPRA compliant by the end of the 2017 calendar year.

But that is not enough for PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch.

"It has been more than three years since Patrick Williams made his disclosure. A lot of time and money could have been saved had the Secretary of Interior done her job and exercised oversight," Ruch said in a statement. "Instead, she stepped aside and allowed the Bureau of Reclamation to simply circle the wagons.

"It is still too early to tell whether the Bureau will reach compliance with the law or will just wait until the stage lights dim to revert to recalcitrance."

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