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Quileutes block beach access in push for more tribal land

By Rachel La Corte *The Associated Press*



The Quileute Indian Tribe's reservation at La Push, Clallam County, is seen on the south side of the Quillayute River. The tribe wants additional land on higher ground.

LA PUSH, Clallam County — The small Quileute Indian reservation sits on a shoreline of storm-tossed driftwood and pebble beaches, with dramatic views of rock formations rising out of the Pacific Ocean.

But the same ocean that crashes on these beaches could roll ashore and sweep away the tribe's lower village in a tsunami. That fear is stoking the fire under a long-simmering boundary battle between the Quileute Tribe and the National Park Service. The tribe has closed public access to one beach and threatens to close another if it doesn't get additional land on higher ground.

The tribe has offered a land swap: It will hand over eight acres of disputed land at Rialto Beach and reopen access to Second Beach if the park cedes — or buys for the tribe — enough land to more than double the size of the reservation.

"We don't have anything against the public," said James Jaime, the tribe's executive director. "It was the only way to get the federal government's attention."

The reservation is bounded on one side by the ocean and three sides by Olympic National Park. The tribe wants to move its school, senior center, tribal offices and some housing to higher ground as well as expand its reservation.

Of the more than 700 members of the tribe, 350 live on the reservation — 250 in the flood zone.

"Our primary concern is the health, safety and welfare of not only the tribal members, but the entire community," said Jaime.

Upping the ante

Tribal leaders originally sought 1,200 acres, but are now asking for about 800 acres to add to their 1-square-mile reservation — 309 acres of park lands and 480 acres of private land it wants the National Park Service to purchase for them.

The Quileute reservation was established in 1889 at the mouth of the Quillayute River; Olympic National Park has bordered the reservation since 1953. The tribe and the park have been debating the boundary at Rialto Beach for decades. The tribe argues that it owns most of Rialto Beach, but the park has built a parking lot and a restroom and both sides are disputing eight acres of land there.

The dispute came to a head last year after a tribal member was cited for collecting firewood near the disputed boundary. While charges were dropped, Jaime said the tribe needed to take action.

To get the government's attention, the tribe closed off access to one of the most beautiful sections of Washington state's Pacific shore, Second Beach, in October 2005. The beach is public, but the parking lot and access to the trail to the beach is on tribal ground.

"This was the one that actually brought them to the table so we could start some serious negotiations," Jaime said.

The park service has offered 274 acres of park land — a deal that officials say the tribe should take.

Olympic National Park Superintendent Bill Laitner said the park wants to make sure the tribe can move people out of the tsunami zone.

"We feel that is of utmost importance," he said. "We believe we can do that. We don't believe we can solve all of the tribes' problems for all time."

After several meetings, the two sides remain at an impasse, and the tribe said it's ready to raise the ante.

"If there are no improvements to this offer and we do not resolve this issue, Rialto Beach will be closed next year," Jaime said. "Rialto Beach is very important to the park. It's very pristine, a very beautiful piece of property."

Laitner agreed, but said that while closing the beach would be inconvenient for park visitors, it would also be "devastating to the local economy" of the tribe.

"I don't think the tribe wants that," he said.

Tsunami fears

The park is also set to negotiate with another nearby tribe that wants to move housing out of the tsunami zone. Larry Burtness, the planner and grant writer for the Hoh Tribe, about 30 miles south, said the tribe wants to move the 130 members who live in the flood zone of the 440-acre reservation to higher ground.

He said they haven't yet begun formal negotiations with the park service for about 20 acres of park land. They are also seeking to negotiate with the state and private business for additional land in the area.

The last time a tsunami hit the area was 1964, when a quake in Alaska generated waves that caused damage in southeastern Alaska, on Vancouver Island, Washington, Oregon, California and Hawaii.

"The concern is very real," Burtness said, adding that the reservation flooded earlier this month from heavy rains.

Jaime said that if a tsunami warning were issued for the coast, people would have just minutes to travel nearly a mile down the only road out of the reservation.

In October, the Quileute Tribe had a reservationwide tsunami drill with a complete evacuation of the lower village.

"What I fear the most is at 3 o'clock in the morning, when we are all sleeping and not prepared," Jaime said. "Our exercises, our drills, they're structured, they're choreographed. It's the real event that's going to be unpredictable."

Any change in the boundary would have to be approved by Congress, but the dean of the state's congressional delegation, Rep. Norm Dicks, said he worries that if the tribe doesn't accept the current offer, it may end up with nothing.

"We're all concerned about the safety of the tribe and the possibility of a tsunami," he said. The tribe has "to realize that they are running a risk by not accepting this offer."

What's fair?

Jaime said the land exchange is the only fair deal that can be made, noting that the tribe lost most of its land more than a century ago and doesn't want to lose any more.

"We ceded 90 square miles of property to the federal government; now we have just one square mile," he said.

But Jaime said they're not using the tsunami concern to make a land grab.

"It's the complete reverse. We're trying to prevent the park from taking over our land," he said. "It's not a tribal land grab. It's the national park that's been grabbing our land. If Rialto Beach is something that they need, and they want, then we should be compensated in equal value."