

INDIAN WATER RIGHTS GAIN

Special Office Created, Veeder May Be Director

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Interior Secretary Rogers C.B. Morton, during a press conference in Washington on Monday, announced the creation of a National Indian Water Rights Office.

The action was taken by the Administration, explained Morton, in response to the need for better protection of Indian water rights.

The new office, he stated, will be funded in the amount of two million dollars during its first year of operation. The U.S. Geological Survey, the Interior Department Solicitor's Office, and Indian representatives appointed with the consent of the Tribal Chairman's Conference will provide the expertise required in functioning to protect Indian water rights.

Demands from Indian leaders for better protection of Indian water resources have intensified in recent months. Bureau of Indian Affairs water rights authority William H. Veeder has become a symbol of the water

issue.

In August, Veeder received an ultimatum from BIA Deputy Commissioner John O. Crow. He was directed to either accept a transfer to Arizona or be fired.

On August 30, Veeder refused the transfer and stated, he would "not participate in the destruction of the Indian Tribes occupying those Reservations" which rely on the Southwest waterways for their existence.

The order which would transfer Veeder has been rescinded, Morton said. Louis R. Bruce, Commissioner of the BIA, told the Indian Press Association that Veeder will "almost certainly" assist the new office, either as its chief legal counsel or as its director.

Veeder, with 30 years of experience in water law with the Interior Department, the Justice Department, and the State of Colorado, originated the concept of a separate agency to protect Indian resources.

The 60 year-old water authority has charged that a conflict of interest exists in the Interior Department. While Interior is charged with the protection of Indian rights, it has also been conducting programs which result in the reduction of Indian resources, said Veeder.

Water Rights . . .

(Continued from page 1)

During the Monday conference, which was called for discussion on Indian matter exclusively, Morton also commented on recent congressional action on Alaska Native land claims.

Acknowledging that "there is a consensus among the Executive and lawmakers of both parties" on the land claims question, Morton said that he was gratified to see the Senate and House Interior Committees report out legislation similar to that sought by the Administration.

Morton indicated he believed the land claims to be very close to a settlement. He was hopeful that other proposals in the Nixon Administration's Indian legislative package would be acted upon favorably by Congress.