

Indian groups challenge gaming critics head-on

Washington — Indian gaming is the most regulated form of gaming in the U.S., according to a National Indian Gaming Association press release.

Since the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act became law in 1988, tribal governments have had to defend themselves against critics, who for various reasons, have

charged that tribal gaming enterprises do not meet the control standards of private, commercial operations.

Indeed, they do not, the association said, adding that the internal controls of tribal gaming often surpass the standards set by casinos in Atlantic City and Las Vegas.

In an effort to bring an end to unfounded accusations, a joint task force formed by the National Indian Gaming Association and the National Congress of American Indians has finalized a set of minimum internal control procedures for gaming facilities operated by Indian nations under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act.

The first edition of these baseline procedures was unveiled and will be presented to the National Indian Gaming Commission, an independent federal oversight agency.

"The whole purpose of having these minimum standards is to show congress, federal and state lawmakers and the public that tribal governments can have minimum standards, can agree on minimum standards and can regulate themselves," said Rick Hill, NIGA chairman.

Regulation of Indian gaming is three-tiered — often a complex, comprehensive web of tribal, state and federal controls woven out of the pre-existing power of tribal self-government, state negotiation and federal civil and criminal jurisdiction.

The joint NIGA-NCAI task force was formed in 1994 to coordinate the position of Indian tribes on gaming matters. Over the last year, the task force formed a working committee made up of attorneys, certified public accountants and tribal leaders to develop the minimum internal control standards.

The project was born out of the recognition that vital tribal programs funded by gaming revenues would not survive unless the gaming operations are relied upon as having strong internal controls.

Indian gaming is governmental gaming, similar to state lotteries. Revenues are used to fulfill the basic human needs of reservation communities, such as housing, education, health, job train-

ing and a myriad of other social services.

No one has a greater interest that tribal governments in ensuring that the honesty and integrity of Indian gaming are carefully protected. Tribal leaders have made sure that Indian gaming is already tightly regulated and these standards simply reinforce and institutionalize this mission.

These procedures will also serve to dispel any and all myths that too frequently arise about Indian gaming, usually from public and private competitors that want the gaming industry left to themselves.

Indian gaming represents only about 7 percent of the entire legal gaming industry in the U.S. The lion's share of the industry is comprised of state-operated gaming, such as lotteries (37 percent) and private, commercial gaming, including casinos, pari-mutuel racing and others.

Of the 550 federally-recognized Indian tribes in the U.S., only 130, or less than one-fourth, have Class III (casino-type) gaming enterprises located in 25 states.

NIGA counts 140 tribal governments as members. The association was formed by the tribes to protect their sovereign governmental rights in the gaming arena and to support their interests in the congress and elsewhere.

The National congress of American Indians is the oldest and largest tribal organization in the U.S. and represents the interests of 188 Tribal governments.