

Light flashes green for gorge casino

A final analysis by the Bureau of Indian Affairs demolishes the arguments against a casino in Cascade Locks

At last, there's a fair, honest and thorough federal evaluation of the Warm Springs tribes' proposal to build a casino in the Columbia River Gorge. And it concludes what the tribes have been saying for years: The casino should be built in Cascade Locks.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs on Friday published its final environmental impact statement on the various alternatives for a Warm Springs casino. The three-volume study identifies a 25-acre site in an industrial area in Cascade Locks as the preferred alternative.

You can find the report at www.gorgecasinoEIS.com. It's worth reading, especially if all you know about the project is the relentless opposition bankrolled by the Grand Ronde tribes, who want to ensure there is no Portland-area competition for their own lucrative casino.

When you set out to kill the only economic hope for tribes suffering with a staggering 60 percent unemployment rate, you ought to have your facts straight. But that hasn't stopped the Grand Ronde and others from making a broad range of unsubstantiated claims.

Here are facts: Fisheries scientists say a casino in Cascade Locks would pose no jeopardy to endangered salmon and steelhead in the river. The visual impacts would be muted, too, because the casino would be built inside an urban area, not high on a bluff near Hood River on land that the tribes could use as an



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Cascade Locks has much at stake over a new Warm Springs tribal casino.

alternative site for the casino.

Critics have overstated the traffic congestion and potential air pollution, too, according to the federal study. The tribes plan to build an interchange on Interstate 84 at Cascade Locks. It's laughable that the Grand Ronde, with a casino clogging a treacherous two-lane road to the Oregon coast, would be among those raising traffic concerns about a casino next to a four-lane interstate freeway.

Now that the federal analysis has demolished the environmental arguments, you're going to hear again that Cascade Locks would be Oregon's first "off-reservation" casino, and

would set off a tribal stampede to Portland and other cities. That's not true, either.

The Warm Springs tribes are in the unique position of owning land — the site near Hood River — in federal trust even before the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act was approved by Congress. Most experts on gaming law believe the tribes can legally build a casino there. Gov. Ted Kulongoski recognized that the state faced an either-or choice: Hood River or the better, less environmentally sensitive site in Cascade Locks.

Moreover, the town of Cascade Locks sits on what was the ancestral homeland of the

Wasco, one of the three Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. All of the tribes roamed the gorge and fished the river for centuries and still have treaty rights there. It is outrageous that people who have spent all of a couple of years in the gorge now feel entitled to describe the tribes as outsiders who have no business there.

When the 45-day comment period for the environmental analysis ends, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar should promptly make the two-part determination to allow the casino at Cascade Locks. Salazar must decide whether placing the land in federal trust is in the best interests of the tribes and not detrimental to the surrounding area. He also must determine whether the site should be made eligible for tribal gambling. The lengthy federal analysis strongly supports both findings.

Salazar must send his decision to Oregon's governor for concurrence before the land is moved into trust. Kulongoski has worked out an agreement in which the tribes would swap 175 acres of land near Hood River and, over decades, give the state as much as \$850 million for a college scholarship fund. He's eager to concur on the casino at Cascade Locks. But if Salazar delays, Oregon's next governor almost certainly will block the project. Democrat John Kitzhaber and Republican Chris Dudley both oppose a casino in the gorge.

There's no reason for more delay. A full and fair environmental analysis supports the Cascade Locks site. This has gone on for almost a decade. That's enough.