

Government trying to locate thousands of Indians owed money

^Graphic:@ INDIAN-MONEY, shows breakdown of trust fund money owed, posted Feb. 27.

^Photos:@ Of Indian trust officer Karen Whitemon in Carson City, Nev., posted Feb. 27.

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Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON - Federal officials want to distribute millions of dollars they owe thousands of American Indians - if only they can find them.

More than \$100,000 awaits some people. It is money owed from land the federal government has held in trust for individual Indians. In all, the government has \$63.3 million to distribute to about 54,000 people.

The Interior Department collects about \$330 million a year in royalties and leases on behalf of 300,000 Indians, including those officials have been unable to find.

In a stepped-up effort to find them over the past three years, the Interior Department has hired private investigators and more than 50 trust officers to work on the cases, publicized a list of people owed money and created a Web site and a toll-free number-- (800) 678-6836 - to provide information about the unclaimed money.

So far, officials have distributed \$79 million to about 60,000 people. Among those found was Linda Cordasco, a 51-year-old bus driver from Brick, N.J. Cordasco, a Cheyenne-Arapaho Indian who was adopted by a white family as a baby, did not know she owned about 100 acres of land in Oklahoma until just a few years ago.

The land, which is held in trust by the federal government, had accrued \$120,000 from leases for oil, gas and pasture grazing by the time officials proved it was hers in 2005.

"When you don't have much, it is like winning the lottery," said Cordasco, who used the money to renovate her condo, buy two new cars and take a trip out West with her best friend. Cordasco continues to receive about \$200 in royalties each month. But it took her several years to navigate the complex federal bureaucracy to get to this point.

A few years ago, her adopted brother found out he was owed some money for trust land and suggested that she find out if she also had an open account at the Interior Department.

After "years of shoveling paper work," officials determined she was the Rosana Pawpa they were looking for. Her adopted family had changed her name. The initial money is gone now, but the divorced mother of two has no regrets about how she spent it.

"We got to see how the other half lives," she said. "It was a real blessing." The new push to find trust beneficiaries is part of a larger reform effort at the Interior Department, which has been involved in a class-action lawsuit by individual Indian account holders since 1996.

The plaintiffs, led by Elouise Cobell of Montana's Blackfeet tribe, argues the Interior Department squandered \$137 billion it collected over a century from oil, gas and other companies leasing Indian land.

The system is so broken, Cobell says, that Interior officials contacted her husband about money the agency owed him only a few years ago.

"I'm the lead plaintiff in this lawsuit," she said. "They all know my name. It was really strange to me that they wouldn't know about my husband. "She says little has changed in the last few years.

"It all just boils down to the fact that the Interior Department is one of the worst trustees that could ever be in place," said Cobell. "Individual account holders are not a priority even now."

But Interior officials say they have made substantial reforms to address the needs of trust beneficiaries, including the creation of 52 new trust officer positions, changes to the way officials handle title records and other accounting reforms.

"I'm confident that the reforms under way ... will result in the operation and management of the trust in a fiduciarily sound manner," said Ross Swimmer, the special trustee for American Indians at the Interior Department. Officials also say they are doing their best to find account holders who may not care if they are found. More than half of beneficiaries the agency can't find are owed less than \$100. Even so, officials say they have made it a priority to find everyone on their "whereabouts unknown" list.

"Indian country has a whole lot of issues to deal with," said Maria Streshinsky, a spokeswoman for the Office of the Special Trustee. "We don't want to be holding on to money that could be helping the people out there.

"In addition to trust officers, the department has hired two private investigation firms to look for top account beneficiaries.

"We employ some of the same kind of techniques when you're looking for a fugitive," said Walter Lamar, a private investigator, who tracks the top 100 beneficiaries for the agency, using databases and other investigative tools. "But in this case, we are looking for people who are deserving to be found so they can enjoy the benefits of their trust accounts."

Karen Whinton, a trust officer in Nevada, recently took up the search for a mentally ill woman who has not been in contact with her relatives since the 1970s. "We just don't ever give up," she said.

Last year, Austin Gillette, a trust officer in North Dakota, found a man who was owed more than \$50,000 in settlement money. He was living in a homeless shelter in Kalispell, Mont. The 43-year-old had been adopted by non-Indians and had no idea that he had any money or blood relatives who were eager to find him, Gillette said. Gillette drove 850 miles to Kalispell, picked him up and brought him back to North Dakota to be with family.

"The money made him happy," Gillette said. "But he's more happy now that he's got family."

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^On the Web:

www.doi.gov/ost/LocatingIIM/whereabouts.html, Interior Department's list of people who are owed money but officials can't find.

^GANNETT NEWS SERVICE CORRECTION

Editors:@ Papers that used the GNS story slugged INDIAN-MONEY that moved on the Washington wire Feb. 27 are advised of the following correction. The story provided an incorrect toll free number. The correct number is 1-888-678-6836.