

By AP Wire Services

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A judge has granted more time for Congress to approve a \$3.4 billion settlement against the government for swindling Indian tribes out of royalties for oil, gas and grazing leases.

But U.S. District Judge James Robertson warned that the latest delay — which moves the deadline for congressional action from April 16 to May 28 — is the last he will approve. The delay is the third since the settlement was reached in December.

"From where I sit, the settlement appears to be a win-win proposition," Robertson said at a court hearing Thursday. "It needs to get done."

If Congress does not confirm the settlement by mid-May, Robertson said, he will order Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and other top officials to appear before him to explain why.

The proposed settlement, which would end a 14-year legal case, calls for the Interior Department to distribute \$1.4 billion to more than 300,000 Indian tribe members across nearly all 50 states. The government also would also have to spend \$2 billion to buy back and consolidate tribal land broken up in previous generations and create a \$60 million Indian Education Scholarship fund.

Most lawsuit participants would receive at least \$1,500, and many would receive considerably more.

If cleared by Congress and Robertson, the settlement would be the largest Indian claim ever approved against the U.S. government, exceeding the combined total of all previous settlements of Indian claims.

The Interior Department

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manages about 56 million acres of land and leases it for mining, grazing and oil and gas production.

The 1996 lawsuit filed by Elouise Cobell, a member of the Blackfeet Tribe from Montana, alleged the government had breached its responsibility to manage assets belonging to American Indians and had refused to fix a flawed accounting system that led to the loss of billions of dollars.

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