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The federal government owes the Osage Nation at least \$250 million because of mismanagement of mineral assets it held in trust, the U.S. Court of Federal Claims has ruled.

The ruling, issued late Friday, also states that two additional issues, which the Osage Nation has estimated are worth approximately \$60 million, should be ruled upon after a trial.

The case was originally two suits brought by the tribe against the federal government in 1999 and 2000 and later combined. It deals with claims that between 1972 to 2000, the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Osage Agency failed to collect all royalties owed to the tribe and to properly invest funds collected on production from tribal oil leases.

Mineral rights in Osage County are separate from surface land ownership and are held in trust by the BIA for the tribe. Money from oil and gas leases is to be collected by the BIA, given to a tribal trust and passed on to individual headright holders.

The complex case has yet to be fully settled, and the money will not officially be awarded to the tribe until then.

The ruling "may very well result in the largest judgment by a tribe against the United States in history," said Jefferson Keel, the president of the National Congress of American Indians.

Friday's judgment is a result of a 10-day trial in 2006 on the first half of the case. In it, the court held that the Osage Nation is entitled to compensation for five breaches of the government's fiduciary duties as trustee: failure to collect royalties based on highest offered prices; failure to collect full royalties during price controls; failure to promptly deposit funds because of unreasonable failure to certify a federal depository; failure to maintain appropriate cash balances; and failure to obtain investment yields in accordance with the law.

The exact amount owed to the tribe has been the subject of several more years of research and legal wrangling, leading to Friday's judgment.

In the ruling, Chief Judge Emily Hewitt also states that the court is "dismayed" by the federal government's approach to the resolution of the plaintiff's claims. Hewitt asked that the government assist the court in resolving the tribe's first round of claims without a "repetition of strategies that appear calculated to result in delays," while also assisting with the case's second phase.

Osage Nation Principal Chief Jim Gray said he was pleased with the ruling on the tribe's motion for summary judgment.

"We're excited, very much so," Gray said. "This is a huge victory for the nation; we've been battling this case in the federal court for well over 10 years now. This is a big, big decision."

John Echo Hawk, the executive director of the Native American rights fund, which represents many tribes in similar cases, said that this ruling is a "significant step forward for not just the Osage Nation but for all tribes seeking resolution of their trust funds claims against the United States."

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