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By Michael Doyle

North Fork Rancheria tribal leaders are still pushing for a Madera County casino amid questions about Interior Department plans and their partners' finances.

The tribe needs decisions, the partners need money and the administration needs time.

"There has been a delay, but in a new administration, there are new players," Elaine Bethel Fink, chair of the North Fork Rancheria Tribal Council, said Wednesday. "They have to come up to speed on the issues."

Fink and hundreds of other tribal leaders are convening with President Barack Obama on Thursday at the administration's first White House Tribal Nations Conference. The conference and associated events, including a reception Wednesday night at the National Museum of the American Indian, span many topics crucial to the nation's 564 recognized tribes.

For the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians, the most pressing political issue is the \$250 million-plus casino proposed for four miles north of Madera. The project still needs to clear several Interior Department hurdles.

We'd like to see that move along," Fink said while preparing to meet with staffers for Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa."

Accompanied by Kevin Day, chair of the Tuolumne Me-Wuk Tribe, Fink was lobbying prior to the formal White House event. So far, Radanovich has not taken a

## California tribe seeks decisions on off-reservation casino

formal position on the proposed North Fork Rancheria casino.

As currently planned, the casino would include about 2,500 slot machines, 70 gaming tables, multiple restaurants and a hotel. Planners are targeting a 305-acre site off Highway 99, about 35 miles from the North Fork Rancheria.

One hurdle is Interior Department approval for an environmental impact statement. The draft environmental study was released in February 2008, followed by a heavily attended public hearing at the Madera County Fairgrounds. Tribal leaders wanted the final study approved earlier this year, but Interior Department officials still have the three-volume report under consideration.

Separately, Interior Department officials are also reconsidering broader policies governing the purchase of casino land away from the traditional reservation.

"We're reviewing many of the issues involved in off-reservation gaming," Interior Department spokeswoman Kendra Barkoff said Wednesday.

Some lawmakers, including Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, want the Interior Department to adopt a policy that only permits new off-reservation casinos where tribes can show they have an "ancestral or historic tie" to the land. McCarthy, who has received thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from California tribes that currently operate casinos, cited in an Oct. 6 letter the

"tremendous amount of controversy" provoked by new off-reservation casino proposals

Fink said the North Fork Rancheria has strong historic ties to the Madera County site.

The North Fork Rancheria intends to collaborate on its gambling venture with the Las Vegas-based Station Casinos, which filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in late July. The casino company reported assets totaling \$5.7 billion and debts totaling \$6.5 billion, according to the July 28 filing.

Company and tribal officials have both insisted the bankruptcy will not interfere with the North Fork plans, though Station Casino officials are now requesting a four-month extension -- until next March -- in the deadline for presenting a reorganization plan.

"The debtor's businesses have been and continue to be negatively impacted by the continuing recession," Station Casinos stated in an Oct. 23 bankruptcy court filing. "The financial performance of many of the debtors' key business units have yet to stabilize, making valuation of the debtors' businesses and assessment of their future prospects ... extraordinarily challenging."

*[Correction from the Tribe: The article refers to 2,500 slot machines. The plan for the North Fork casino is for 2,000 slots. Also, Chairperson Elaine Fink of the North Fork Rancheria of Mono Indians did not accompany Chairman Kevin Day of the Tuolumne Band of Me-Wuk Tribe while in Washington DC.]*