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BLM Makes Spirit Cave Man Determination

Reno, Nev.—The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) made a preliminary determination today that ancient human remains from Spirit Cave are Native American but they cannot be culturally affiliated with the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe, or with any other contemporary group. The remains, including Spirit Cave Man, will remain in federal ownership.

“After more than four years of consultation with the tribe, analyzing the information and reviewing policy, I feel it’s time to make this determination,” said Bob Abbey, Nevada State Director for the BLM. “Although this determination is disappointing to the tribes, I am committed to a continuing dialogue with them on this and any other issue that comes up as we continue to determine the affiliation of human remains from BLM-managed lands.

The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) requires federal agencies to inventory Native American human remains removed from public lands and housed in museums to determine if they are culturally affiliated with a contemporary Indian tribe.

Cultural affiliation means there is a relationship of shared group identity which can reasonably be traced historically or prehistorically between members of a present-day Indian tribe and an identifiable earlier group. Cultural affiliation is established when the preponderance of the evidence indicates a relationship.

The kinds of evidence reviewed can be geographical, biological, archaeological, linguistic, or based on folklore, oral tradition, historical, other information and expert opinion.

Spirit Cave Man has been housed at the Nevada State Museum for nearly 60 years. The mummy is of particular interest to the scientific community because radiometric dating on artifacts found with the mummy indicate an age of more than 9,000 years. A request by the Museum to conduct

DNA analysis and radiocarbon dating on Spirit Cave Man and other sets of human remains from the Lahontan Basin was withdrawn earlier this year.

“The Secretary of the Interior is considering recommendations from the NAGPRA Review Committee on the disposition of remains like those from Spirit Cave that cannot be affiliated,” said Abbey. “I am keenly aware of the cultural sensitivity of the materials from Spirit Cave and I have no intention of approving any research that involves invasive testing of the human remains until the Secretary acts.”

An inventory of human remains in the BLM managed collections at the Museum lists 145 sets of remains, representing at least 154 individuals. Three of these sets have been affiliated and two have been repatriated. An additional 35 sets may be reasonably affiliated and the BLM is in consultation with appropriate tribes on these remains. The BLM is working on determinations of affiliation for the other 107 sets. In addition, seven sets of remains, discovered on BLM-managed lands after 1990, have been repatriated.

Anyone wishing to dispute this preliminary determination may respond by Oct. 2, 2000, with written statements and evidence to the State Director, Bureau of Land Management, P.O. Box 12000, Reno, NV 89520. BLM will evaluate additional evidence using the same process and criteria used in making the preliminary determination. The BLM may affirm the original determination or make a new determination.

The report and an executive summary on the evidence presented is available on the internet at www.nv.blm.gov.