

Navajos lease slot-machine rights to Arizona gaming tribes

The Navajo Nation on Monday signed an agreement under which it will lease the rights to more than 1,000 slot machines to three gaming tribes near Phoenix and Tucson.

The deal, also signed by the Gila River Indian Community outside Phoenix and Chandler, the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, north of Fountain Hills, and the Tohono O'odham Nation, near Tucson, is expected to generate more than USD 100,000 for the Navajos over several years.

The Navajos have the right to operate 1,400 slot machines in Arizona under an agreement with the state that is based on population. The Navajo Nation has plans to eventually build four casinos in Arizona but has yet to break ground for any of them.

The tribe also plans to open its first casino on Nov. 17 in New Mexico.

Under Monday's agreement, Gila River will lease the rights to operate 411 additional slot machines, the Tohono O'odhams will lease rights to 454 machines and Fort McDowell will lease the rights to 180.

Robert Winter, chief executive officer of Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise, was among those who suggested the Navajos put their slot-machine rights up for auction in January.

The idea, Winter said, is to generate money from the leases to fund the development of casinos near Flagstaff, Cameron, Page and a fourth location that has yet to be determined.

Preliminary plans call for the Navajos' first Arizona casino

to be constructed 20 miles east of Flagstaff, off Interstate 40, Winter said. There is no groundbreaking date.

Meanwhile, Firerock Casino, being built by the Navajos in Gallup, N.M., is expected to open on Nov. 17, Winter said.

In addition to 472 slot machines, 10 blackjack tables, five poker tables and a 400-seat bingo room, the 65,000-square-foot facility will have a restaurant, an outdoor patio and grill, a noodle bar and a Navajo fry-bread cafe, he said.

The rights to operate the 472 slots were issued in New Mexico, Winter said.