

Tribes Celebrate 30th Anniversary of Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Victory for Indian Country

On Feb. 25, 2017, the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians commemorated the 30th Anniversary of the historic Cabazon-Morongo U.S. Supreme Court decision by hosting a gala honoring Native Americans and other dignitaries at the Fantasy Springs Resort Casino in Indio, CA.

A quarter century ago, tribal gaming consisted of little more than a scattering of bingo halls and card rooms sprinkled across a handful of remote Indian reservations in just a few states.

That changed on Feb 25, 1987 when, after months of courtroom battles, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Cabazon Band of Missions Indians and the Morongo Band of Mission Indians and confirmed the rights of federally-recognized Indian tribes, as sovereign nations, to offer gaming on Indian reservations.

The landmark courtroom victory proved to be a defining moment in the struggle for self-determination and self-sufficiency for more than 550 federally-recognized tribes across the U.S. whose isolated reservations suffered from neglect, crushing poverty and a lack of schools, roads, water and other infrastructure.

“It’s humbling to think about the role our two tribes played in advancing sovereignty and creating hope and opportunity for tens of thousands of Native Americans across the nation,” said Morongo Tribal Chairman Robert Martin. “The Supreme Court ruling put tribes on the road to self-reliance by establishing new revenues for tribes to use to provide vital services to our people.”

Today, there are more than 350 tribal casinos in 28 states. Tribal gaming has fueled economic and social opportunities across the nation by funding vital tribal government services that have brought roads, clean water, housing, health care and education to Native Americans.

Tribal gaming has created tens of thousands of jobs and billions in direct and indirect regional economic benefits, through gaming and non-gaming businesses. Tribal governments use gaming proceeds to diversify and open other businesses, and to assist non-gaming tribes.

Martin and Morongo Tribal Vice Chair Mary Ann Andreas were both members of the Morongo Tribal Council during the Supreme Court challenge.

“This struggle was generations in the making, and we were on the brink of a victory that would help secure a better future for tribes. We were all in, and we weren’t about to give up,” Andreas said.



During the gala celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the pivotal U.S. Supreme Court decision, tribal leaders gave special recognition to the attorneys behind the landmark 1987 ruling. Pictured from left to right: Morongo Vice Chair Mary Ann Andreas, Cabazon attorney Glenn Feldman, Morongo attorney George Forman, Cabazon Chairman Doug Welmas, Cabazon Vice Chair San Juanita Callaway and Morongo Tribal Chairman Robert Martin.

In California, the victory at the Supreme Court led Congress to pass the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in 1988. California tribes subsequently took the question of tribal gaming to voters where they received overwhelming support, first in 1998 when California voters passed Proposition 5 with more than 63% voter approval and again in 1999 when 64% of voters approved Proposition 1A.

The 2016 California Tribal Government Gaming Impact Study, commissioned by the California Nations Indian Gaming Association (CNIGA), found that tribal gaming added \$5 billion in value to the California economy in 2014, the last year for which figures are available. Tribal gaming also supported 63,000 jobs statewide, provided \$3.3 billion in worker earnings and produced nearly \$400 million in state and local tax revenue in 2014.

The report also found non-gaming tribal businesses generated \$3.3 billion in economic output, supported 21,000 jobs, and produced another \$80 million in state and local tax revenue.

In California alone, gaming tribes have contributed over \$600 million to assist California’s non-gaming tribal governments, funds that have helped non-gaming tribes pursue their own economic development ventures such as opening retail shops, markets, gas stations and other entities.

“We’ve come a long way, but we still have a long way to go,” Martin said. “It’s been a good 30 years, and we hope to make the next 30 years even better as Indian Country continues to move forward.” ♣

For more information about the Cabazon Band of Mission Indians, visit www.fantasysprings.com. For more information about the Morongo Band of Mission Indians, visit www.morongonation.org.