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Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Get \$48 Million to Move Off of Disappearing Louisiana Island

It has taken well over a decade of advocating on behalf of his tribe to keep his scattered community intact as their island on Louisiana's Gulf coast disappears under Gulf of Mexico waters, but now Chief Albert Naquin of the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw is high fiving.

That's because the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced in January that it had awarded the state-recognized tribe \$48 million to pay for a move, most likely farther north inland, making them the first community of official climate refugees in the United States.

Chief Naquin is ecstatic to have gotten the funds.

"I'm very, very pumped," Chief Naquin said. "I'm very, very excited. I've been working on this for 13 years. I've taken some pretty big hits for doing that, and not just locally."

Naquin said the tribe's standard of living should improve as well.

The monies are part of \$92 million awarded to Louisiana as part of a National Disaster Resilience Competition the state won. HUD's \$1 billion competition awarded funds to states and communities nationwide.

The Isle de Jean Charles has been reduced from 11 miles long and five miles wide in the 1950s, to around a quarter-mile wide and two miles long today. The tribe's disintegrating homelands have already displaced and scattered many families, and some of the funding will pay for homes to reestablish community.

"Now we're getting a chance to reunite the family," Naquin said. "They're excited as well. Our culture is going to stay intact, [but] we've got to get the interest back in our youth."

Chief Naquin expressed dismay that other communities are caught up in situations similar to theirs.

"Maybe we can be the model community to teach others," he said.

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers offered to relocate the tribe in 2002, but the Native American Cajun community, who has occupied the land for 170 years, rejected their offer at the time.

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"It's not the best place, but for them this is their story and they don't want to move," Naquin told *Indian Country Today* in 2008. "To me, it's not where I live or where my mom and dad lived that makes me an Indian, but they say they lived here all their lives and their parents before them. Well, that's all fine, but what about their children?"

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A 2014 ProPublica report about the tribe, *Losing Ground*, said sinking land and extreme erosion along the southeastern coast of Louisiana could lead to the "largest forced migration for environmental reasons in the history of the country."

The report blamed the loss of land on changes in the Mississippi delta designed to increase flood protection and enhance oil and gas production.

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Their island also lies in an area that is most vulnerable to climate-induced sea level rise, according to experts that include the [U.S. Geological Survey](#).

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The tribe will still maintain ownership of their island home after they move as part of the agreement, Naquin said. The land contains their history, and their burial grounds.

“I hope it lasts 200 years,” he said.

However, *Houma Today* reported that experts suspect the island will be completely submerged within 50 years. NOAA measurements show the sea level is rising almost 10 millimeters (0.4 inches) a year in Louisiana because the land is also sinking in a process known as subsidence.

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