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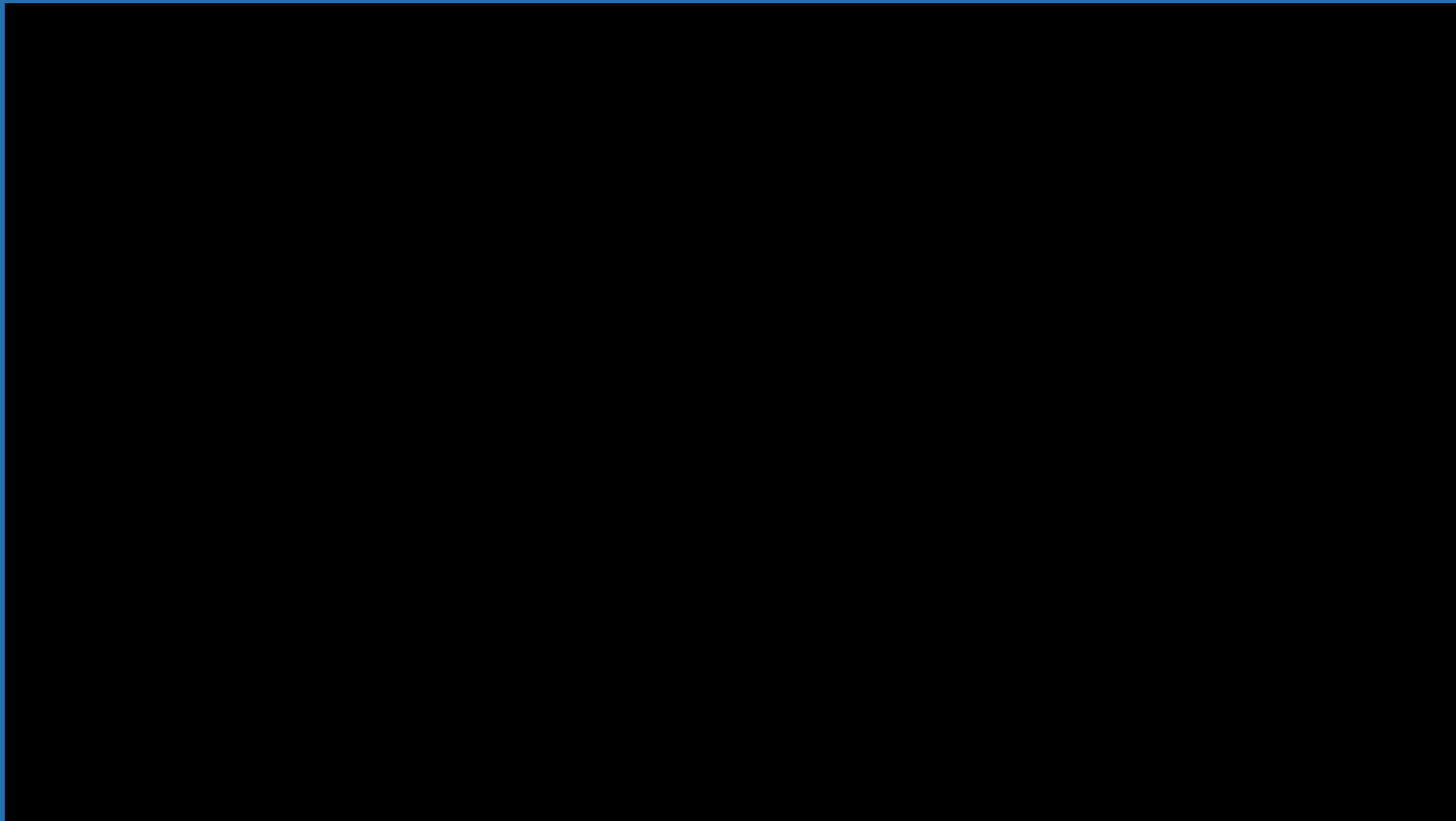
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Tribe declared first official climate refugees in U.S.



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Digital Reporter

Friday, February 19, 2016, 11:11 AM - In the deep south lies a dwindling island in Louisiana, about 130 km southwest of New Orleans. It is home to the Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians and many of its residents have been forced to flee due to the effects of climate change.

The island continues to sink under waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Due to sea level rise, flooding, oil and gas development, about 98 per cent of the tribe's traditional lands have eroded since 1955.

The 22,000-acre island has been reduced to a mere 320-acre strip today. As of 2009, only 25 houses remain occupied, down from 63 only five years prior, according to a report by Northern Arizona University.

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Isle de Jean Charles - Flickr - Karen Apricot

However, in January the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced that \$1 billion would be granted to 13 states and local communities for resilient infrastructure and housing projects as part of its National Disaster Resilience Competition. About \$93 million of the funds were awarded to the state of Louisiana, allowing the tribal community to "relocate to a resilient and historically-contextual community," according to the HUD.

The tribe will have to move to higher ground, making them the first community of official climate refugees in the United States, Indian Country Today reports.

Chief of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians, Albert Naquin, has been rallying to secure funding for over a decade.

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

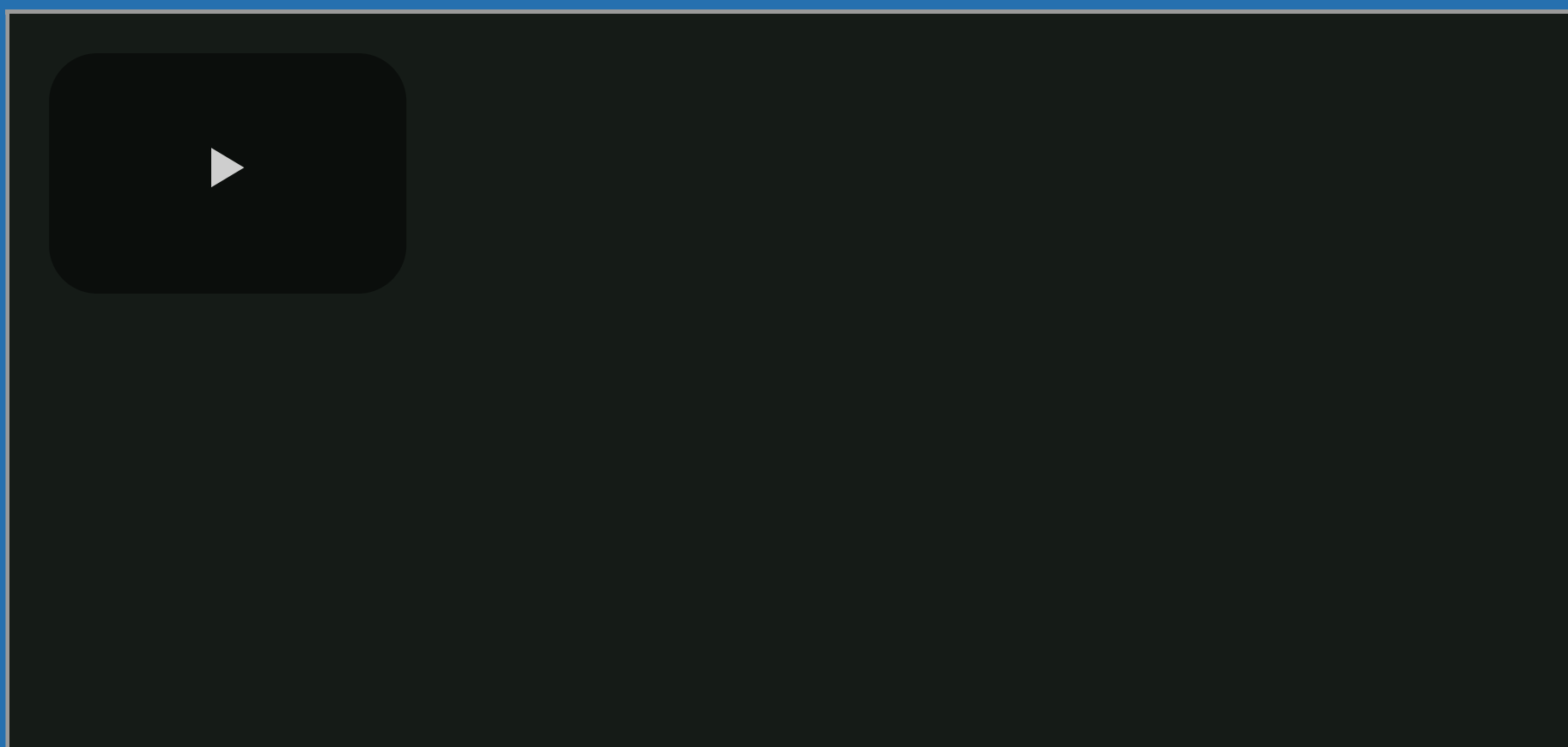
It has yet to be specified how much the tribe will receive for the relocation as HUD funding will be split with other development projects along the state's coast where erosion is also occurring at a devastating rate.

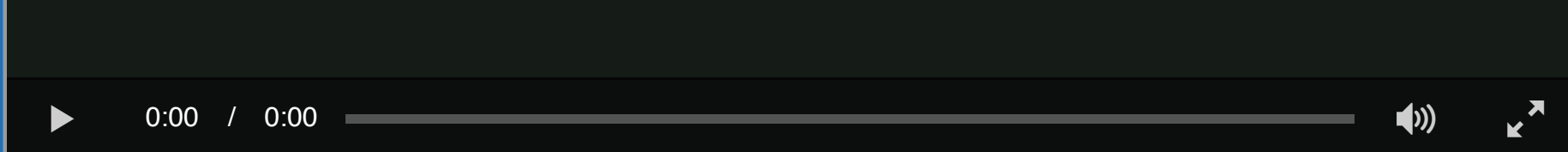
The tribe will still maintain ownership of their island even after relocation, according to the Indian Country Today. However, experts say within 50 years the island may be completely submerged.

The Isle de Jean Charles Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians are not the only ones who have been forced to leave their land. At least two communities in Alaska and one in Washington are reportedly going through the same process.

SOURCE: Indian Country Today | Mashable | HUD

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