

Tribes to discuss sports betting at NIGA gaming expo in Las Vegas

By Richard N. Velotta and Colton Lochhead Las Vegas Review-Journal
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The nation's Indian tribes are driving much of the expansion of sports wagering in the United States, and the subject will be top of mind when many tribal and gaming officials gather at a convention in Las Vegas next week.

The number of states that have legalized sports betting now stands at 32 with 10 of those approved on paper, but not yet operational, according to a report issued last week by California-based gaming industry researchers Eilers & Krejcik Gaming. That means that 57 percent of the nation's adult population can place a single-game wager at their neighborhood sportsbooks or on state-approved apps. It wasn't that long ago — just three years — that Nevada was the only state where legal bets on single games could be placed.

Now, with some big-population states including Ohio and Massachusetts closing in on legislative approvals, tribes are seeking out places where they can make their mark on the industry.

At the top of the list: two states that border Nevada — Arizona and California — with very different outlooks on how they get in the game.

Arizona at work

Arizona's bill to legalize sports wagering in the state was just signed into law in April, but regulators are wasting no time in erecting the framework and are on track to formally launch the Arizona Department of Gaming in September.

Under the state's law, 10 licenses will be available to professional sports groups like the Phoenix Suns, Arizona Cardinals, the PGA Tour and NASCAR for both retail and mobile wagering. The law also allows for 10 licenses for tribes for mobile betting as well.

Chris Grove, managing director of sports and emerging verticals for research company Eilers & Krejcik, said that the Arizona's market could look a lot like Indiana's, which could eclipse \$3 billion in bets in 2021 at its current pace.

But everyone is keeping a close eye on what's happening in the Golden State, with its nearly 40 million residents, on the sports-betting front.

"California, assuming it authorizes retail and online sports betting, will be the largest market in the U.S., hands down," Grove said.

On 2022 ballot

Last year, a coalition of 18 tribes submitted 1.4 million signatures to get sports wagering legislation on the 2022 ballot in California, and in May the secretary of state verified that there were enough valid signatures to qualify.

That measure is expected to face heavy opposition though, most notably from non-tribal card clubs that were excluded from the initiative's language.

"I think those groups will continue to fight until the oceans swallow California," Grove said of the two sides.

Brendan Bussmann, director of government affairs for Las Vegas-based Global Market Advisors, said that Nevada could stand to learn a little as more states like Arizona and potentially California enter the market, such as "modernizing" some of the regulations and allowing for mobile registration similar to what other states offer.

In Nevada, mobile wagering made up about 60 percent of bets placed in 2020. New Jersey, which surpassed Nevada last year in total sports wagering handle, saw that number hover closer to 90 percent.

One of the biggest questions out there amid the expansion is could these neighboring states' moves affect Nevada's market?

Both Bussman and Grove don't see those state's cannibalizing any part of Nevada's market.

"Everybody said that the expansion of gaming across the country would kill Nevada, and we just came off our highest numbers ever," Bussmann said.

"When you have stellar events, people are going to come in for those."

Grove agreed.

“The more sports bettors you create, the more potential customers you create for what Las Vegas has to offer, assuming Las Vegas continues to hold up its end of the bargain,” he said.

When the National Indian Gaming Association begins its Indian Gaming Tradeshow & Convention at Caesars Forum on Monday, the first day of the event will focus on the growth of tribal sports wagering across the country.

Tribal entities are operating sports betting in Colorado, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York and Pennsylvania and they’re close to starting operations in Arizona and Washington.

Florida compact

In Florida, the Seminole Tribe, which operates the Hard Rock International franchise, just signed a 30-year gaming compact agreement with Gov. Ron DeSantis that would put the tribe in charge of all forms of sports betting in the Sunshine State.

The agreement still needs approval from the U.S. Interior Department and opposition to the deal has surfaced from other gaming interests in the state affiliated with racetracks and from daily fantasy sports operators FanDuel and DraftKings.

Monday’s deep dive into tribal sports gambling will begin with a keynote address by Ron Allen, chairman and CEO of the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe of Blyn, Washington, on whether tribal sovereignty and sports betting can co-exist.

That will be followed by hourlong deep dive panel discussions into the state of sports wagering in the states of Arizona, Washington and California.

Show organizers say 3,000 people have registered to attend NIGA's show next week.

The four-day show opens Monday as one of the first big conferences at Caesars Forum. The first two days are dedicated to educational presentations, panels and discussions of issues surrounding gaming in Indian Country. On Wednesday, the trade show featuring more than 350 exhibitors opens.

The show — the organization's 35th — originally was scheduled in San Diego, but the organization opted to move it to Las Vegas because of restrictions on large gatherings in California.

Tribal gaming

Tribal gaming interests have already begun making their mark on Las Vegas.

Mohegan Gaming and Entertainment, operated by the Mohegan Tribe of Uncasville, Connecticut, collaborates with JC Hospitality, owner of Virgin Hotels Las Vegas, and Richard Branson's Virgin Group on the [first casino operated by a tribal entity](#) in Las Vegas when the resort opened its doors March 25.

In early May, the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians of Hillside, California, announced [it was buying the Palms](#) from Red Rock Resorts Inc. for \$650 million. The deal is expected to close by the end of the year.

The Seminole Tribe also has expressed interest in establishing a Strip presence, but no deal has been announced.

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