DISCUSSING STEPS which Coushatta Indians must take before receiving federal financial assistance during a meeting in the Coushatta community near Elton, La., are (from left) Harry Rainbolt, a representative of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs; Ernest Sickey, tribal chairman of the Coushatta people, and David Garrison, head of the Governor's Commission on Indian Affairs. The tribe received official recognition from the U.S. government on June 27.

Coushattas Turn Attention to Getting Reservation Land

The Coushattas, who were exiled from their Alabama lands in 1795, were a recognized tribe until 1953, when two Indian women, who owned some 160 acres and held them in a government land trust took their land from the trust and began holding it themselves under simple title. Subsequently, according to Garrison, the Indian Bureau abandoned its responsibility to the tribe and thus began a 20-year period of non-recognition by the federal government.

That the tribe has emerged again as a recognized tribe is significant in itself, according to Coushatta tribal chairman Ernest Sickey, who stated that the Coushattas are the second tribe in United States history to gain recognition through administrative channels without an act of Congress or an executive order of the President. The only other tribe to do so is the Miccosukee of Florida, who were recognized in 1960, he said.

Of 50 Indian tribes petitioning for official recognition or re-recognition, only the Coushatta has succeeded in recent years, Sickey stated.

Sickey said the Coushatta gained recognition after 14 months of efforts, with the help of Louisiana's Congressional delegation, especially the Coushatta's own Seventh District Congressman, John Breaux, and with the aid of Garrison commission, which was created by the governor a month or two before the push began.

Pointing to a need for federal and state assistance, Garrison said 33 of the 38 Coushatta families earn less than $3,000 a year.

Harry Rainbolt, Southeast agencies director for the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, was in the Coushatta community Tuesday night to discuss with the tribe the significance of their new relationship with the federal government and the remaining steps which the tribe must take before becoming eligible for all the federal funds and services administered through the Indian Bureau.

While the tribe's gaining of recognition is the important first step toward realizing the tangible federal benefits, it is not the only step, Rainbolt said. The tribe must now acquire enough land to be used as a land base in forming a reservation, he said. They must also formulate and ratify a constitution and by-laws and elect a governing body, he added.

While Rainbolt did not specify how much land is required for a reservation to be established, he made clear that two or three acres is insufficient.