

Susitna project may mean another Cook Inlet land swap

By JEFF RICHARDSON

Mike Gravel would like to build a dam, two dams in fact. The Democratic Senator from Alaska has been nudging legislation through Congress to pay for studies to determine if damming the Susitna River at two points in its upper reaches would be physically and economically feasible.

The dams would provide electricity to Anchorage, the new capital at Willow and possibly Fairbanks. Gravel's legislation would provide the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with \$5.45 million for its first year of study of the feasibility of the project.

Among other problems with this idea right now is the fact that the dams, if ever built, would flood lands selected by four village corporations in the Cook Inlet Region under terms of the 1971 land claims act and a subsequent special land swap.

All of the problems with the project, including those alleged by conservation groups, have taken on a certain urgency because the Corps of Engineers wants to test the soils in the area around the proposed dam sites, but they must do it while the ground is frozen and before warm weather makes snow travel dangerous or impossible. However, the Corps needs a permit from the Bureau of Land Management, which has not yet conveyed the lands to the Native corporations.

Although BLM policy dictates that any projects taking place on land selected, but not conveyed, to Native corporations shall be subject to letters of non-objection written by the corporations, that policy has apparently been waived in this case. According to BLM's Joette Storm, BLM State Director Curt McVee has decided to allow the Corps of Engineers access to the land, with certain environmental restrictions. Storm said the non-objection letter policy "does not preclude them (BLM and the Corps) from making an agreement when there's an overriding public interest in an energy project such as this."

The village corporations for Chickaloon-Moose Creek, Knik, Tyonek and Ninilchik are not happy with the situation.

According to Agnes Brown, president of Tyonek Native Corp., "In a nutshell, we have said, on behalf of Tyonek, we will not issue a letter of non-objection, we're not going to say 'go ahead, flood our lands' until we know how we're going to be accommodated."

She added that the Cook Inlet Region, Inc., regional Native corporation, whose boundaries encompass the Anchorage bowl, much of the Kenai Peninsula as well as the Susitna River drainage, has taken the position that the villages should not consent. The regional corporation has been attempting to work out yet another swap that will provide the villages with land of equal value somewhere else.

However, the region's efforts are not welcomed by at least one village group, Chickaloon-Moose Creek. Chickaloon's attorney, Edgar Paul Boyko, said he felt a letter of non-objection, properly worded, would not harm his client's interests and argued that the villages should have the opportunity to seek accommodation from Congress on their own:

"We lose 40,000 acres, we get 20,000 acres and the region gets 40,000 acres, or the value in cash," Boyko asserted. "My thinking is that we should do our own talking with Mr. Gravel, not the region."

Under the plan put forward by Cook Inlet Region, not yet endorsed by Gravel, the villages would relinquish claim to their Susitna lands and accept acreage on the Kenai Peninsula and on the west side of Cook Inlet from the region. The region would then turn to Congress in an effort to obtain authorization to select lands to make up for that conveyed to the villages, or seek financial compensation equal to the value of those lands. Under this plan, the villages would give up two flooded acres for every dry acre they picked up from the region.

Cook Inlet President Roy Huhndorf told the Tundra Times the 2-1 acreage formula was mandated by the land claims act and had a precedent in the previous Cook Inlet land swap, the result of a years-long battle to find sufficient land within the corporation's boundaries to fulfill the acreage entitlement set by the act.

According to environmentalists, the Susitna dam project could have an adverse impact on peregrine falcons nesting in the area; the falcons are an endangered species. In addition, they claim the project cannot pay for itself and will produce upwards of four times the amount of energy that Anchorage and Fairbanks combined can use. They are highly critical of at least one state energy official who suggested surplus energy could be used to develop heavy industry in the Matanuska Valley near Anchorage.

The Watana and Devil's Canyon Dams would flood 50,000 acres and form a body of water 80 miles long.

According to a BLM source, environmentalists may take that agency to court before week's end.