

LAND BILL: HOPES ARE HIGH

Native Leadership Optimistic Bill Could Come Out This Year

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Alaska native leaders returned from Washington this week still harboring hopes that land claims legislation will be forthcoming during this session of Congress.

The basis for such hope seems to rest upon indications given them by Chairman of the House Interior Committee Wayne Aspinall that he will some way or another get a bill out of his committee.

"We have a great trust in Aspinall," Eben Hopson, executive director of the Alaska Federation of Natives, said Monday. "and are confident that he will really try to come up with a bill."

Hopson and other native leaders talked with the chairman in Washington following adjournment of the committee until after the November elections.

President of the AFN, Emil Notti, could not be reached Monday but in a press release, the native leader said he was "extremely hopeful" that a just settlement can be enacted before the end of the year.

Similarly, John Borbridge, Jr., first vice-president of the organization, said from his Juneau office, "We are going all out on the proposition that there will be a bill.

He admitted that chances for passage were slim but emphasized that the natives are pushing as hard as they can to make something happen.

"Certainly, we are optimistic," he added, "or we would never have been here in the first place."

No official reports on a land claims bill came out of the Interior Committee before adjournment last week nor out of its subcommittee on Indian Affairs which held closed sessions on the

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matter Sept. 17, 18, 21, and 22.

However, unofficial reports indicated that the subcommittee was favoring a land settlement of 40 million acres—30 million more than was provided for in the recently passed Senate bill.

Hopson, who was in Washington with about 11 other native leaders for a week and a half, said from his Anchorage office that their daily reading was also that the committee was favoring 40 million acres.

He added that he had no definite reading on rumors that the committee was considering cutting back the cash settlement provided for in the Senate bill. The Senate bill provides for \$500 million in cash and \$500 million in royalty payments.

The AFN has consistently called for a settlement of 40 million acres of land, a 2 per cent royalty on mineral revenues from lands not deeded to the Native villages, and \$500 million in Federal compensation.

"The AFN bill, Borbridge stressed, 'is the only bill we are supporting at this point in time and we are continuing efforts to advance it.'"

"The main shred of hope," the native leader continued, "for passage during this congressional session is that action will be taken on the idea of a task force."

Such a group, he explained, would be appointed from the subcommittee to work on a land claims settlement until Congress reconvenes after the November elections. The task force, he added, would merely come up with a basic structure for a settlement but, at least, would give the committee something to work with immediately.

The idea of a task force was

brought up at the Interior Committee's last session but no action was taken on the matter. It was this session that ended in a huff when ranking member of the House Interior Committee Rep. John P. Saylor and Rep. Howard Pollock of Alaska disagreed on holding further sessions on land claims.

Hopson said that Aspinall indicated at their last meeting that he might be taking the whole matter into his own hands and might appoint some kind of a task force himself.

If such a group is appointed, Hopson continued, then possibly the matter could come out of the subcommittee, go to the full committee and out onto the floor of the House for action on it by Thanksgiving.

Then a House-Senate conference would have from the first of December until Christmas to iron out a bill.

The time is limited, he admitted, but (reemphasized that he had faith in Aspinall's desire to get the legislation passed.

Borbridge added indications have been that once the subcommittee reports out a bill, the full committee and the House will agree with it.

Another factor to consider, Hopson said, is that the attitude of Congress might change to the AFN's advantage following the November elections, depending on which Congressmen are elected.

A chief frustration of the AFN delegation, Borbridge said, was that, because the formal subcommittee had taken no formal action, the delegation did not have a document before it with which to work.

Hopefully, he added, after the elections the subcommittee will have something that the AFN can react to and take a position on.

One of the significant things to develop out of the AFN's fight for a fair land claims settlement, Borbridge said, has been the self realization of native leadership. The natives are really furnishing the substantive leadership from Alaska, he added. And, this leadership is not going to disappear after the land claims issue is settled, he predicted.

Also, he added, because of land claims, the native leadership has developed a sense of unity and purpose and has shown that it is not going to back off.