

Native, federal officials blast plan for ANWR

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Tundra Times publisher

Alaska Native corporation officers and federal officials are sharply criticizing a new plan unveiled by the State of Alaska for land exchanges involving the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

"It's hogwash," said Bill Horn, Department of Interior assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks.

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And Morris Thompson, president of the Fairbanks-based Doyon Ltd., said comments made recently by Department of Natural Resources Commissioner Judy Brady can be taken as nothing less than a personal affront to those involved.

"The citizens of this state — Natives and non-Natives alike — deserve and should demand a much higher degree of public composure on sensitive issues from their appointed officials than that recently displayed by Commissioner Brady," Thompson said.

Doyon is one of the five Native organizations currently negotiating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Also reacting to the state's proposal

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and comments was Tom Roberts, chief counsel for Sen. Frank Murkowski.

"Sen. Murkowski does not believe that this is a secret, clandestine process," Roberts said, referring to Brady's recent charge that land trade negotiations are being carried out in a secretive fashion. "Sen. Murkowski still believes the land swaps are a good thing and that they have advantages."

At issue is the state's plan for ANWR, which calls for land exchange negotiations to be halted. Under the proposal, the trades would be put on the shelf until Congress made a decision to open ANWR.

The Native corporations would then acquire "bid credits" for land they own outside ANWR and use their lands to "purchase" mineral lease rights.

Currently, several Native corporations are negotiating with the federal government to trade lands they have in wildlife refuges in other parts of the state for oil rights in ANWR.

In a briefing last week, Brady said DNR's proposal would benefit all Alaskans and would be good public policy. She characterized the opening of ANWR as potentially the "biggest land deal of the century," bigger even than the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

She also stressed that the state wants to make sure any Native land deals are subject to Section 7(i) of the ANCSA, which calls for Native corporations to share 70 percent of their resources from subsurface development with other Native corporations.

Under the current proposals, whether 7(i) would apply is questionable because the Native corporations are generally offering only surface lands in the other refuges. And Horn has said that Interior is not interested in gaining the subsurface estate to those lands.

Brady conceded that although the state's plan would probably be less beneficial to the Native corporations, she said they should support it because the negotiations they are currently involved in would not pass the "red face test."

"This deal does not survive close scrutiny," she said, calling it a "sweetheart deal."

Horn questioned why the state is calling the negotiations secret when the state itself was involved in them until earlier this year.

And he said he was disappointed that he was in Alaska last month to meet with Gov. Cowper — shortly before the state plan was unveiled — and yet no mention was made of the plan to him in person.

Horn said he has not yet had time to study the state's plan in detail, but he questioned criticism raised by the state of the negotiations.

"The state was a party to this process for a very long period of time," he said. "They negotiated with what we thought was good faith, then they withdrew."

And he added that while the state may have legitimate concerns, he said they were no reason to derail the entire process.

As for "secret" talks, Horn said, "Of course you don't negotiate in public." But he added that any proposals developed in the negotiations will be submitted to the public for review and comment, followed by debate in Congress.

"The process we are now embarked on was one all parties agreed to, including the state," he said.

But despite the state's plan, Horn

said federal officials will continue the negotiating process.

"We'll continue to negotiate with the Natives in good faith," he said. "The state is always welcome to come back to the table. Its seat is still there," he said.

Thompson also questioned why the state would call the talks "secret."

"To say that our negotiations with the federal government have been 'secretive' in nature, and to imply that our very up front and sound business practices constitute 'back room' wheeling and dealing is just downright ludicrous and more than just a little offensive," Thompson said.

Thompson went on to say in a prepared statement that Native groups first became involved in the ANWR issue only after it became apparent that Native corporations could play vital roles in the overall effort to open the Coastal Plain to oil and gas exploration.

"We support the opening of ANWR for many reasons, not the least among them the economic benefits that would accrue to individuals and groups statewide."

"Yes, we would like to see something in it for us. Thus, the land trade concept."

"Any direct benefits coming to us should, in our opinion, be commensurate with the substantial value of our exchange lands and with the valuable role that we are playing and will continue to play with respect to the opening of the Coastal Plain."

And, like Horn, Thompson stressed that Congress must review the proposals developed.

"We in the Native community would like to ask Brady one question. That is: If having the Congress of the United States review and approve our land trade agreements is not in keeping with good public policy principles, then just what is?"

Murkowski's aide Roberts said the senator is glad to see that the state is

still actively pursuing its position, but that the state's plan raises many questions.

And he said Murkowski will be focusing his attention on opening ANWR. It will be up to the state, the Native corporations and Interior to iron out their differences on the land trades, Roberts said.

If these differences cannot be worked out, he said, the exchanges themselves could become a detriment to opening the refuge to oil and gas exploration and development.

"It's time for the effort to switch to legislation to open the Coastal Plain," he said.