

Sec. Udall Sets Down Reasons for Land Withdrawal

Secretary Udall December 11 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for temporary withdrawal, announced that he has approved the filing of an application by under the Pickett Act, of all

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unreserved public lands in Alaska except those under mineral lease.

The proposed withdrawal would be effective until December 31, 1970. The purpose of this action, the Secretary stated, is to protect the rights of the Alaska Natives by preserving the status quo of the Alaska public lands in anticipation that the 91st Congress will resolve the long-standing problem of Native claims.

The noting of the application on the records of the Bureau of Land Management office and its publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER will operate to segregate the lands from appropriation pending a final decision on the application for withdrawal.

In informing the Chairmen of the Senate and House Interior Committees and Governor Hickel of his action Udall pointed out

that, "Progress toward solution to this problem during the 90th Congress was most encouraging.

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There is strong bipartisan support for prompt and equitable settlement and I am hopeful that legislation will be passed by the next Congress.

"In view of the impending action I believe that it is important for this initial step to be taken now to preserve the status quo during the time when the Congress is actively considering the matter."

"This action" he noted, "will give opportunity for Congress to consider how the legislative commitment that the Natives shall not be disturbed in their traditional use and occupancy of lands in Alaska should be implemented."

Udall said he does not believe this action will adversely affect the State of Alaska. Under existing law, the State will lose its right to select lands now under mineral lease on January 3, 1969.

"I do not want to nullify this right," the Secretary said. But he added that any selections the State does make will be held in suspense, pending the outcome of the Government's appeal from a recent court decision which would require patenting of State land selections regardless of Native protests.

Secretary Udall's letter to the committee chairmen and Governor Hickel said:

"The State contends that it is losing several millions of dollars

in rental income because of the Department's refusal to issue oil and gas leases due to Native protests. Under present law, virtually all of these leases, which would cover millions of acres that are believed to possess enormously rich deposits, would have to be issued on a non-competitive basis.

"It is just not good management for the Federal Government to lease these lands non-competitively at this time when they would undoubtedly bring bonuses running into hundreds of millions of dollars if leased competitively. Any short-run return the State would obtain from the issuance of leases would be dwarfed by the future revenues it would be foregoing," Secretary Udall said.

He said the withdrawal order honors the commitment that Congress has long maintained that the Natives shall not be disturbed in their traditional use and occupancy of lands in Alaska.

"To allow these lands to pass into other ownership in the face of the Natives' claim would, in my opinion, preclude a fair and equitable settlement of the matter by Congress. It would also deny the Natives of Alaska the opportunity to acquire title to lands which they admittedly have used and occupied for centuries," Secretary Udall said.