

Alaska's rural economy: Like a world apart

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Editor's note: In the first of a three-part series, Associate Editor Jeff Richardson reviews some of the strategies recently recommended to boost the viability of Alaska's rural economy. Part 2: Analysis of the Rural Economy by State Labor Economist Neal Fried; Part 3: A companion Analysis of strengths and Misconceptions of the Rural Economy.

The Knowles Administration got a lot of advice during the transition about how to move the Alaskan economy forward. With a strongly avowed commitment to rural Alaska, the administration is perhaps more open to ideas to increase prosperity and economic sustainability in the state's hinterland than any of its predecessors.

However, even before the transition teams held their meetings and deliberations, there were already a couple of reports sitting on the shelf that could provide a gold mine of ideas worth considering.

The Alaska Natives Commission, a joint state-federal body comprised mostly of Native leaders and analysts, conducted an exhaustive 18-month study of factors hindering the social and economic progress of Alaska Natives. Among numerous calls for sweeping change were a number of recommendations specifically on economic issues.

Another deliberative analysis of rural economic conditions in which Natives were well-represented was that conducted by the Rural Alaska Village Economies and Needs (so-called RAVEN) Commission. The commission was formed by Gov. Walter Hickel to examine the causes of the Western Alaska chum salmon crash of 1993 and to recommend strategies to mitigate its effect and prevent a reoccurrence of the crisis.

Many of the recommendations made by the Alaska Natives Commission were based on the strong correlation analysts discovered

between the impact of Western contact on traditional village governance and social systems and a wide variety of issues, from health and education to economic viability of Native villages and families.

Commission recommendations included:

1. Institute Native preference for all federal employment in or related to Alaska similar to that offered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Service;

2. Establish a veteran's preference for service in the Alaska National Guard. Presently, the federal personnel system does not consider service in the Alaska National Guard as "military service" and consequently deprives a large number of Alaska Native job applicants the veteran's preference that others receive;

3. Rationally apply state and federal rules governing local prevailing wages with the objective of hiring more local Native laborers and creating more jobs;

4. Eliminate HUD requirements that prohibit local design and construction;

5. Development training programs to ensure full Native participation in the information age;

6. Establish a State Office of Alaska Native Recruitment;

7. Strengthen and focus state and federal grants on village planning and training in economic development;

8. Ensure that state regional economic planning organizations

are adequately serving Native constituents;

9. Increase government support for Native tourism and eco-tourism activities;

10. Make the CDQ fisheries program permanent;

11. Analyze and address problems in the fisheries limited entry program that work against Natives and village economies.

The RAVEN Commission made wide-ranging recommendations specifically on economic issues. One of the strengths of the report is its recognition of the economic importance of subsistence. Here is a representative sampling:

– that the state support co-management of fish and game resources by state and rural residents;

– that traditional Native knowledge be used more widely in making fish and game management decisions;

– that the state be more flexible in allowing alternative forms of local governance;

– that they institute numerous measures to improve management of fisheries for rural utilization;

– that existing programs designed to support rural economic initiatives be fully funded;

– that the state support development and maintenance of locally or regionally available hydroelectric, geothermal, solar, wind, coal and natural gas resources and other alternatives to diesel fuel as a source of electric-

ity in rural Alaska.

Despite the authoritative stature of both reports, there is no indication as yet that executives or lawmakers in Juneau or Washing-

ton have moved to systematically review or embrace many of the recommendations of the Alaska Natives Commission or the RAVEN Commission.