

Murkowski outlines changes in 1990

by Sen. Frank H. Murkowski
for the Tundra Times

While most congressional committees seem to do their best work with national headline writers, another committee has been ducking the limelight and putting its effort into improving the quality of life for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

OPINION

In fact, the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs can take credit for accomplishing several important changes in 1990.

The select committee is tasked with recommending new policies and laws affecting this country's over one million American Indians and Alaska Natives. Here is a glimpse of some of the issues we've dealt with this year:

•**Federal State Commission:** In the long-term, Alaska Natives may be most affected by the enactment this year of legislation establishing a special federal-state commission to conduct a comprehensive review of Alaska Native policies and programs.

The joint commission on Alaska Native policies and programs will assess the circumstances of Alaska Natives, evaluate the programs affecting them, and make recommendations to the Congress and the State of Alaska for legislative and/or administrative action.

•**Housing:** Our proposal for 3,000 new units of Native American housing, nationwide, became law this year

as part of the National Affordable Housing Act of 1990. Approximately 300 of the new units should be built in Alaska.

•**Forestry Resources:** Legislation to define the Secretary of Interior's responsibilities for forest management on trust lands also provided for technical assistance for the management of forests on Alaska Native allotments.

The new law authorized appropriations to allow Native non-profit corporations to provide technical assistance on lands owned by Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act corporations.

It also established a program of internships, fellowships, and scholarships in forestry for which Alaska Natives will be eligible.

•**Repatriation:** The Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act, passed this year, established and defined the obligations of Federal agencies to protect gravesites of American Indians and Alaska Natives on Federal lands.

The law also requires the federal government and federally funded museums to return human remains, sacred objects, and items of cultural patrimony to their Indian or Alaska Native owners.

•**Mental Health:** Congress passed the committee's proposal to require the Indian Health Service to develop a national mental health plan.

The grants are to be used to establish community-based demonstration programs addressing mental health, alcohol and drug problems.

•**Child Abuse/Family Violence:** Under this new statute, Alaska Native

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villages or their non-profit corporations will be able to obtain grants to develop programs for child protection services, treatment of abused children, family violence prevention, and community education and training.

•**Native Culture and Language:** After several years of trying, this year we succeeded in gaining the passage of a Native American Languages Act.

This law was designed to promote respect for the rights of Native Americans to use their own languages, and encourage colleges to grant credit for proficiency in those languages.

It also requires the Federal government to reevaluate existing policies and procedures to provide Congress with recommendations for needed changes.

•**Indian Affairs Budget:** The committee had a significant degree of success in persuading the budget and appropriations committees to follow through on the select committee's



recommendations this year.

Our strong advice to these committees helped achieve a budget of over \$4.1 billion for Indian programs for fiscal year 1991.

The White House is asking for help identifying Alaskans interested in being nominated to the seven positions that will be filled by presidential appointment.

While the legislation mandates that at least six members of the 14-member commission be Alaska Natives, the Commission is designed to be broadly representative of Alaskans. I urge all Alaskans with an interest in Alaska Native policies and programs to consider offering their time and expertise to the Joint Commission.

Copies of the laws I've described, and of other legislation enacted during this congressional session, may be obtained by calling my district offices in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Ketchikan, Kenai or Juneau, or by writing to me in Washington, D.C.