

AFN DEBATES LAND QUOTAS

Group Tackles Thorny Land Distribution Problem Eying Unity

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Staff Writer

The thorny issue of land claims and distribution will probably keep the AFN Board of Directors in session most of this week, till a proposal emerges which will bring the Arctic Slope Native Association back into the organization.

Hopefully, the AFN Board will be able to present a united Native front when it meets with State officials in Juneau at the end of this week.

The Board met last weekend in Anchorage, continuing its sessions for two days. At the end of the weekend, despite the fact that many Board members had to return to their homes, the rest expected to continue meeting this week with ASNA representatives till an agreement is reached.

Discussion on Sunday centered around an ASNA outline of a proposed House of Representatives bill to settle Native land claims.

ASNA president Joseph Upicksoun presented his group's proposal at the board meeting in Anchorage. The proposal divides Alaska's Native groups into seven Regional corporations, approximating the divisions made in the Federal Field Commission report.

Each corporation is allocated

a percentage of whatever land and money is awarded by Congress, based on the land it will surrender claim to.

According to the initial ASNA proposal, the Arctic Slope, Southwest, and Southern Coastal regions each obtain 15 per cent of the total yield. The Northwest and Southeast each draw 10 per cent, the Aleutians 5 per cent and the Central region 30 per cent.

The proposal provides for a 50 per cent sharing concept, with half the revenue from each area divided among the other six.

Many AFN Board members objected strenuously to the ASNA proposal, which bases division of any land claims settlement on land owned or occupied, rather than on population, as in the AFN proposal.

"We on our part have made a decision," Upicksoun told the AFN Board members in Anchorage, "This is a land claims settlement. As Al Ketzler said lately in Fairbanks, 'This is a real estate transaction.'"

The ASNA proposal argued that the House of Representatives refused to act on the land claims settlement passed by the Senate because they felt it was unworkable.

In a preliminary analysis developed by Keith J. Anderson and Associate, the Seattle based

(Continued on Page 6)

Land Distribution...

(Continued from Page 1)

law firm representing the ASNA, the Slope group argued Bill S1830 was unacceptable to the House Subcommittee.

The Senate bill was attacked as cumbersome, lengthy, with mechanics which would be unworkable in practice. Members of the House subcommittee on the Interior, including chairman Wayne Aspinall of Colorado, were said to want a simpler, more direct claims bill.

The Arctic Slope Native Association claims use and occupancy for the 4,000 Eskimos north of the Brooks Range of 55 million acres of land. This includes, of course, land which is potentially oil rich, eagerly sought by oil companies in the lower 48.

"House members don't want a settlement of claims which will be subject to jurisdictional disputes among Native groups," commented AFN president Don Wright. "We should be wise enough to realize there will be plenty for everybody."

Many Board members stressed the value of the land to their people, many of whom derive their subsistence from the land they claim.

"We have to realize that if there is a depression, many people will return to live off the land."

"What you need is unity now. Your population is going to explode. We need our reservations and we need the right to run our own reservations."

One possible compromise was suggested to mend the split between those groups with large amounts of land and those whose land has already been lost to government and other development. The compromise would divide the State at the Alaska Range, asking for most of the acreage awarded above the Range, where more land is presently under Native dominion.

The argument for this compromise, which was explained by AFN attorney Clifford Groh, was the Native groups from the Southeast and Southcentral part of Alaska would be able to obtain little land in these populated areas.

However, others argued, land obtained south of the Alaska Range is valuable residential and commercial property, land that will increase in value as Alaska develops. Its certain monetary value was compared to the Arctic Slope lands which, except for mineral production, are barren and worth little on the commercial real estate market, though of inestimable value to the people of the Slope.

David Hickok, co-author of the extensive Federal Field Commission Report, "Alaska Natives and the Land" was invited to the Board meeting by State Senator Willie Hensley to explain how his Commission divided the Native peoples into five regional groups.

Hickok explained the patterns of use and occupancy which his group studied in their analysis of the Alaskan lands.

"Use and occupancy varies in time," he explained. "For example, the Tlingit use of land hasn't changed since the early 1800's. They use the sea. Other groups have migrated at various times to follow the game."

He explained that a relatively small acreage of land, if chosen carefully with first preference, could give the Native groups control of the economic development of their areas, especially in the Arctic Slope.

For example, he said, land chosen to include access routes and areas of proven mineral wealth, seaports and other strategic areas would give the Eskimos effective control of the area.

Whether the AFN can reach an agreement with the militant ASNA is a question which may not be resolved for several days.

"We realize each of you has pride in his own land," ASNA head Joe Upicksoun told the group. "By an accident of nature, right now the eyes of the Nation and the World are centered on the North Slope..."

"Without intending to belittle your lands, the real reason for the entire settlement is the oil, which by accident is on our land, not yours."