

Udall Says He Will Develop Land Solution Program

Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall last week notified Senator Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska) that the Interior Department will move positively to develop a program for solution of the Native land claims issue in Alaska.

The secretary's assurances came in the form of a letter replying to the most recent of several appeals which have been made over the past four years by Senator Gruening for Interior Department action to resolve what the senator has described as "the single most difficult problem in Alaska directly related to policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs."

Secretary Udall declared he "fully agreed" with Senator

Gruening "that there is urgent need for policy decisions which can lead to action that will resolve the Native land claims issue in your state." He suggested that conferences to perfect proposed legislation which could be presented to Congress next year should involve officials of the State of Alaska as well as Native leaders and policy officials of the Interior Department.

Indian, Eskimo and Aleut groups in Alaska have asserted claims for land in Alaska which involve more than 150 million acres. The Native claims overlap each other in some cases and in one case extend the Alaska border into Canada.

In his most recent appeal to Secretary Udall for action to

settle this problem, Senator Gruening noted in a letter dated August 10 that the Department's failure to act has now "virtually paralyzed selection by the State of land to which it is entitled by terms of the statehood act. Meanwhile, the Natives—Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts—are denied action on their long overdue claims."

"The problem presented by the Native claims," Senator Gruening wrote, "is not, by any means, a new one. It has received congressional consideration in the past, as for example in connection with the Tlingit and Haida claims. In recent years it has, unfortunately for these long patient Alaskans, become more acute

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and pressing. I am sure this is a matter of major concern to the Department of the Interior, as the agency responsible for management of the public domain."

Noting that the Alaska organic act of 1884 contained an instruction to the secretary of the interior to appoint a commission to report what lands if any should be reserved for use of the Indians in Alaska, Senator Gruening said:

"Now, 82 years later, Congress is still trying in vain to obtain advice from the Department of Interior on the manner in which claims of Native citizens of Alaska for land should be adjudicated. I would suggest to you, therefore, that you appoint a new commission to make a thorough study of rights of Natives of Alaska to claim ownership of land. The report of such a commission should be completed swiftly and made available to Congress as soon as possible in order that a determination can be made as to whether legislation is ne-

cessary and, if so, the provisions which should be enacted.

"Meanwhile, no reason exists to prevent the Department of Interior from adjudicating now the claims before you, involving more than 150 million acres of land in Alaska. The failure of the Department to act on this matter, while it has been growing steadily more serious for five years, represents a shocking disregard of the rights of the Native citizens. They were aided by a bureau of the department under your supervision—the Bureau of Indian Affairs—in filing the claims now before you, some of which have languished since October, 1961, and yet the department does nothing.

"That the failure of the Department of Interior to make the studies and recommendations necessary or to act otherwise to achieve a satisfactory policy of land management in Alaska has had extremely serious consequences is fully demonstrated by the plight in which the people of Alaska—Natives and non-Natives—now find themselves with urgently needed lands withheld from use because of the conflicting claims by Native communities against other Native communities and the public in general.

"While this problem has been growing steadily more serious for all the people of Alaska, Natives and non-Natives, the Department of the Interior has taken no action to resolve it. The tenor of communications from the department has been that legislation must be enacted to provide the executive branch with machinery for adjudication of the claims. To date, however, Congress has not had the benefit of any specific proposal as to what the department thinks it needs in the way of legislation.

"For the Native citizens of Alaska as well as the State government, the failure of the

Department of the Interior to act swiftly on the Native claims has caused disappointment and discouragement. Native communities and individuals, having been caused to expect generous conveyances of land, have found the realization of their hopes and dreams of property ownership delayed for, in some cases, years on end. This is wholly unfair to the people of Alaska whose future is bound to the future of the land they inhabit.

"Entirely too much time has elapsed since the Department of the Interior should have faced forthrightly the urgent question of Native rights to land in Alaska. I have repeatedly urged such action. Again I urge you to employ forthwith powers of the Department which now exist to adjudicate the Native claims pending before you."

Secretary Udall's reply was as follows:

"In response to your August 10 letter I fully agree with you that there is an urgent need for policy decisions which can lead to action that will resolve the Native land claims issue in your state. I am giving personal attention to this issue and will be holding a series of high level conferences with policy officials of my department in the month of August in an attempt to narrow the issues and define the various alternative solutions.

"I am already of the opinion that the larger issue is a three-cornered one and will not be resolved unless the State of Alaska and its policy making officials are involved at the highest level in the discussions. Indeed it has occurred to me already we will not get a consensus that could lead to long-term solutions unless a statesman like approval, taken by all concerned (including the Native leaders and their friends)—and unless there is a willingness to make necessary compromises in order to end the present impasse.

"It is now the aim of this department to initiate new discussions with state people and with the Native leaders with the objective of producing consensus legislation which could be presented to the Congress next year. It is our hope that our thinking will crystallize in point where we can have a significant discussion of the alternative solutions with you and the other members of the Alaska congressional delegation before Congress adjourns."