

FOOD STAMPS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Senator Mike Gravel (Democrat-Alaska) has introduced a bill in the Senate ordering the Department of Agriculture to "disregard Native Claims Settlement payments in determining eligibility for food stamps."

Senator Gravel charged that the "misguided policy of the Department of Agriculture in regard to their recent decision on food stamps for Natives is contrary to the spirit of the law and the intent of Congress."

The Agriculture Department, he explained, has ruled that any Native who receives money from the Settlement Act's Alaska Native Fund and who receives food stamps faces a reduction or elimination of the stamp benefits.

In his remarks recently, the Senator stated that the Claims Act "was not a welfare bill. Congress enacted the settlement to compensate Alaska Natives for land taken from them, to simply restore what belongs to them,"

Senator Gravel also cited an earlier H.E.W. decision regarding Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) payments to Natives.

The Senator explained that he alerted Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz to the H.E.W. precedent but that "Mr. Butz, for no visible reason, has decided to ignore the H.E.W. decision, as well as the clear intent of Congress in the Settlement Act."

The Alaska legislator also quoted provision 2(c) of the Native Claims Settlement Act, which states that "no provision of this Act shall replace or diminish any right, privilege or obligation of Natives as citizens or relieve, replace or diminish any obligations of the U.S. to promote the rights or welfare of Natives."

Senator Gravel said the Agriculture decision "will work an unnecessary hardship on those least able to afford it: those Natives who are at the bottom end of the economic ladder.

"Loss of food stamps would be a major blow," he added, "especially for the many who cannot obtain steady employment. That's critical in areas of chronic unemployment."

The Gravel Bill — S.4030 — has been referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture for detailed consideration and possible hearings.