

Natives critical of implementation

Alaska Native leaders, state officials and representatives of other Alaskan interests testify during Senate hearings

WASHINGTON—Alaska Native leaders, a state official, representatives of various Alaska interests and Sen. Mike Gravel, D-Alaska, were critical of the Department of the Interior's handling of certain facets of the implementation of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANSCA).

They testified during the first day of Senate Interior Committee oversight hearings on issues concerning implementation of the settlement act. Further hearings, at which more Alaskan groups and an interior official will testify, are scheduled for Monday.

Most of the persons who testified before the committee today said they were concerned with the delay in conveying land titles to Native groups, who have now made all their land selections.

"Although section 14(A) of the act (ANSCA) provides that titles to lands selected by Native corporations are to be conveyed immediately after selection,

inordinately long delays are occurring between selection of land by Native corporations and transfer of title to the corporations," Gravel said.

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The delay "severely limits the Natives in planning and development of their resources which of course is essential to the life and success of the corporation," Gravel said.

And, Gravel and Martin both pointed out that the delay is not only hampering the Natives, but is also hindering the state in making their land selections.

According to those who testified today, much of the land title problem revolves around decisions on easements across Native lands. While everyone seemed to agree that some easements are necessary, most expressed disappointment with the way interior is handling the easement question.

Ed Weinberg, counsel to Koniag, Inc., a Native corporation, said the problem seems to be that the Interior Department has not adapted its procedures to the Settlement Act.

He said much of the current easement problem could probably be solved if Interior would just give the various parties a "yes or a no and the reasons within a reasonable period of time," then proceed to give the Native groups title to the land.

The problem with the current procedures, according to Weinberg, is that the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will not give title to the land selected if the easement specifications are challenged.

That leaves the land under federal control until the courts can rule on the easement question. Weinberg said this can take anywhere from one to three years.

The problem would be resolved, according to Weinberg, if the Secretary would assume the power he has been given under the ANCSA Settlement Act and reserve the easements, this would permit the Natives to receive title to lands while the easement question is being resolved, Weinberg said.

While land title and easements were the primary issue discussed, they were not the only topics raised. Both Sam Kito, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives and John Borbridge, Jr., president of Sealaska Corp., urged the committee to act to see that Congress appropriates the funds authorized for Alaska Natives in 1973.

In 1973, Congress authorized advance oil and gas royalty payments to the Alaska Native Fund which were to continue until oil began to flow in the Alaska pipeline.

That money, which was to begin in fiscal year 1976 at the rate of \$5 million every six months, was taken out of the 1976 fiscal budget by the Administration.

Stanley Dempsey, a spokesman for the American Mining Congress, asked the Committee

to consider a multiply-use policy for federal land in Alaska that contains valuable minerals.

Jack Hession, a spokesman for the Alaska chapter of the Sierra Club, asked the committee to close D-1 lands to the further filing of mining claims.

Others who testified at the hearings today were: John Sackett and Tim Wallis, representing Doyon Limited; Donald Nielson and Eric Treisman, representing the Bristol Bay Native Corporation; Daniel Alex, representing Eklutna Village Corporation; William Anderson, representing Ouzinkie Village, Inc.; Frank Peterson, representing Ayakulik Village; and Karl Armstrong, representing Koniag, Inc.

Both Gravel and Guy Martin, Commissioner of Natural Resources for the state of Alaska, cited the interior department's delay in transferring title as one of the major problems hampering land planning in Alaska.