

Gruening Clarifies Position On Native Land Claims

By TOM SNAPP

Senator Ernest Gruening has called on the U.S. Department of Interior to draft legislation to settle Native land claims once and for all in Alaska and says he "would be most happy to introduce the legislation in Congress."

In an exclusive interview here Saturday, Gruening told Tundra Times that he would be agreeable to legislation either calling for a Court of Claims to hear Alaska Native claims cases or separate pieces of legislation to be passed by Congress settling individual cases.

While he indicated he favor-

ed villages obtaining modest-sized areas of several thousand acres each, he stressed he was opposed to villages being granted tracts of millions of acres.

He emphasized he felt it would be far better for Alaska Natives to be compensated for the larger claims and then use the monies derived for development.

At the present time he said that large Native claims had completely paralyzed the state land selection program.

"This will help neither the Native nor non-Native," he said.

But the senator did not lay the blame of aboriginal claims

on Alaska Natives. Instead he charged the Interior Department had shirked its duty to draft legislation in this area for Congressional consideration.

Gruening went to great length to explain his position because he said he felt that William Hensley, a student from Kotzebue at the University of Alaska, had misunderstood his position from his attack in a letter to the editor in the past issue of Tundra Times.

"The mere granting of large areas of land is not the solution to the problems of Alaska

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Natives," Gruening said, pointing out that recently appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert Bennett agreed with him in this regard.

"They are entitled to a far better system of education, of vocational and job training, and of jobs themselves if they are to be integrated into the mainstream of American life," he stressed.

He then went on to state he wholeheartedly concurred in the regional high school concept and hotly accused the Bureau of Indian Affairs of operating a segregated high school system at present.

While he said he had been working for years on legislation in this and other areas of Alaska education, he denied he intended to introduce legislation on regional high schools at the present time.

"To do so would be foolish," Gruening said, pointing out that it would have little chance of passing because of the drain of funds for the war in Viet Nam.

Gruening pointed out as significant the recent hearing by the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee on the appointment of Commissioner Bennett, formerly BIA director for Alaska.

"For the first time we approved the appointment of an Indian Affairs Commissioner on the condition that he do such and such. If he does not, then the assumption was that we would get a new commissioner."

One of the big things that is needed is a complete reorganization of the bureau and a switch in emphasis. Instead of extending itself, the bureau should seek to diminish itself, he said.