

AFN-MORTON MEET A SUCCESS

Free-Wheeling Confab Progresses Toward Resolving Problems

By BETZI WOODMAN

ANCHORAGE — With an 11-point bill of particulars from the Alaska Federation of Natives for an agenda, 57 Native leaders sat down with Secretary of the Interior in Anchorage last Thursday to thrash out problems stemming from the Land Claims Settlement Act. Included in the discussions were 21 specific recommendations regarding allotments, also prepared by the AFN.

After a hot, intense closed-door session, the secretary and Alaska Federation of Natives president Roger Lang declared the meeting was "constructive" with "real progress" made. In a press conference after the meeting, Morton and Lang laid out the problems and Interior's promised remedies.

"There are two major issues I want to see worked out," Morton said. "The first is the allotment question. There is something different here — something I can't put my finger on, that has me definitely uptight."

He was speaking of the way land tract allotments to Natives had been rejected. Of the more than 7,700 Native allotment applications filed, some 85 per cent of those completed are being turned down by land inspectors and adjudicators who say they cannot find needed evidence of use.

The second issue which Morton said needed "final resolution" was the matter of Cook Inlet Region Association deficiency lands.

"I'm going to urge the solicitor to deal with these," said Morton, adding that the Cook Inlet group was to "make their best offer" to the solicitor before he left for Washington Friday.

Lang commented that in spite of the large group present for

the discussion, "the issues were not diluted . . . I share with the secretary that it was constructive, a free-wheeling, free-dealing meeting. In the past, problems would get referred for action, but no one ever came up with specific answers. This time we HAVE come up with many answers."

"In most instances," Lang continued, there were specific answers. Many issues were technical and involved, but those problems which were identified have people assigned to handle. A long list remains, "but we won major concessions."

Meetings earlier in the week between Natives and land management officials had set the stage for Morton who then had a list of changes — some major — to offer before he was confronted with arguments about previous policies.

"Although we may not agree on all points," Morton said, "(the conference) uncovered a significant number of deficiencies which if corrected will improve substantially our administration of this program."

As a result, Morton has directed that the following series of steps be taken immediately:

— Applicants (for allotments) will be provided with copies of all field examination report, and Regional Corporations will receive copies of all correspondence sent to an applicant. All official correspondence will also contain a more simply worded,

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MORTON AND LANG — Two main participants in a free-wheeling meeting last Thursday were Secretary of the Interior Rogers C.B. Morton and the AFN President Roger Lang. The meeting involved the Interior Department and the Alaska Federation of Natives, Inc. in an effort to solve post land claims problems involving Native allotments, etc. Roger Lang evaluated the confab as "constructive."

— Photo by BETZI WOODMAN

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straight forward statement. (Corporations can thus act as advocates to help the Native file appeals or produce further evidence.)

— There will be a 30-day advance notice of the Field Examiner's arrival. Applicants will be given 60 days to respond to requests for additional evidence better than the present 30 days but less than the 90 days asked and in cases where an applicant has died, their land grants may be deeded to their heirs, with liberal time allowed to carry this out.

— Interpreters will be used whenever a language problem exists.

— Through a cooperative agreement between the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, a Native advisor will be stationed in each BLM District office.

— In considering evidence, affidavits of the applicant and others living in the area who have firsthand knowledge of the land will be given substantial weight.

(This last was an unexpected concession and this procedure will be given substantial weight by the land inspectors.)

— More specific criteria will be issued for determinations of when sand and gravel are to be considered valuable minerals. In addition, the Geological Survey is being directed to review its existing mineral classifications.

(Land inspectors have rejected allotments which have either sand or gravel because inspectors consider them minerals and by law mineral deposits cannot be gained by land allotments.)

— We will enter into discussions with the U.S. Forest Service into improve procedures involving the National Forests.

— Village and Regional Corporations will be permitted to file selections over existing allotment applications.

The secretary said other technical changes would also be made in which some of the issues require further analysis in the department.

"But I promise you a prompt response," he said. "There will be a meeting called immediately of all BLM personnel involved in

allotments to acquaint them with results of this conference and to advise them of the new procedures."

The secretary spoke several times of the need for "improved communications" between department officials and the Natives.

In the matter of late filers in enrollment, the secretary said, "It is my hope that we could eventually enroll every eligible Alaska Native."

He said he would support pending legislation to allow late-filers some benefits. Such legislation "should be carefully drafted with time to study and know all the aspects."

Morton said he regretted the delays encountered in the 2-C Studies. He assured the Natives that under the contracted Study, to be let probably this week, there will be Native involvement and input.

"And I want to again reassure you that this Study is not designed to result in the reduction of any Federal program in Alaska for the benefit of Natives." He agreed to study proposed legislation on the matter and said he "certainly supports the general objectives" of the bills.

Because the department was unable to finally adjudicate the eligibility of all villages by June 18 of this year, the secretary said he was waiving the regulations to permit contested villages to file their land selections. These selections will be adjudicated when the villages are found eligible.

The subject of easements being reserved in lands conveyed under the Act and those involved with navigable waters had been presented by the Native leaders with a proposed solution. The Native group had asked that steps be taken at once to finalize easement standards.

And they requested elimination of any recreation easements along non-navigable bodies of water. "The BLM maintains that the fish and water are public and therefore an easement is needed. We argue that fish should be more accessible than game for which there are no easements."

These subjects, said the sec-

retary, are "highly complex" and "I have no easy, immediate answer . . . I must rely on my solicitor for his counsel in each situation. The department is, however, attempting to establish some workable criteria."

Although the department has provided assurances for subsistence hunting and fishing on its D2 proposals, the secretary said he recognized the concern on how this would be carried out. "But I am confident that the details of this can be spelled out more specifically as we develop the management plans for administration of these areas," he said.

In final comments, the secretary said his department is now studying possible legislation to permit them to pay into an escrow fund money received for interim administration of land selected by Native corporations.

At the closed meeting, Lang said, Morton put himself on record as promising that "no programs now affecting Natives would be cut-off, phased out or cutback" due to the Land Claims Act.

"We learned a lot," said the secretary of the meetings. "And there is much more we can learn." He praised the Native leaders for the work and understanding of the complicated problems, particularly in the direct and clear presentation of issues needing attention.

Commenting on the sessions and results, Lang said, "For the time spent, we accomplished more in one day than we have for the whole preceding year."

Other leaders left the meetings cautiously hopeful that it was not just another "we'll look into it" affair. But they appeared willing to give Interior its chance to make good, waiting a couple months or so to see if promises were kept and other matters followed up on.

CORRECTION

In last week's edition on Page 4, the photograph of Frank Jones of the Alaska State Economic Opportunity Office in Juneau, was incorrectly identified as Rep. Mike Miller. The Tundra Times regrets the error.