

Gov. Miller's Letter to Sen. Jackson Raises Brows

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WASHINGTON, (Special)—Alaska Governor Keith Miller, in a letter to the ranking members of the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee and the Alaska Congressional delegation, indicated that his administration is willing to reassess its position on the Alaska Native Land Claims.

The letter, received here in Washington by the Senators Friday, is a mild departure from the tough position presented by the

Governor's attorneys and strongly hints that the Miller administration may be willing to compromise with the Alaska Federation of Natives on the specifics of land legislation.

"I believe that it is important that interested parties to the settlement be able to contribute to the debate on the bill in some way (before the Senate Interior Committee)," Miller wrote.

"Please be advised that my Administration is reconsidering its position on the claims. I be-

lieve that this is necessary in the light of recent developments.

"If there is not a fresh approach to the problem by the interested parties, it does not seem likely that Congress will approve a bill this session," Miller added.

Referring to differences between the Miller Administration and Alaska Natives (which he termed "disagreement among Alaskans"), Miller singled out the land grant provisions and the 2 per cent royalty proposal as the

two major areas of controversy.

The Governor said the amount of land granted to Natives might be increased by state disposition of lands to native villages.

"My Administration is weighing the possibility of State selection of lands under the Statehood Act grant for disposition to the Alaska native villages.

"This would obviate the objection in Congress that the disposition of land in a settlement act would effectively remove a sizable portion of land from the

public dominion," Miller said.

Miller also said the native request for an overriding royalty on proceeds from mineral revenues may be fulfilled by action of the Alaska State Legislature.

"It has been my consistent testimony on claims hearings that the State and not the Federal Government has the authority over State selected oil lands.

"The State Legislature may decide to allow the Alaska natives to share in the present oil

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royalty or in additional oil royalty on future leases," Miller added.

The different interests in Washington involved with the native claims issue have varied reactions to the Governor's letter.

It is reported that members of the Senate Interior Committee are somewhat puzzled by the Miller letter, since it does not further clarify the state's position as to how extensive a federal solution can be.

In effect, the letter said the Miller Administration may consider granting land and a royalty to the Natives should the Congress leave those provisions for the determination of the State.

Miller carefully skirted mention of any clear definition of where state responsibility leaves off from federal responsibility except for obscure references to the Statehood Act.

One thing is clear. The Miller letter offers some hope that his administration may become open to compromise.

With national opinion responding more to the Natives' plea for justice, and with the state acquiring an ever-expanding image of wealth and greed, Miller may now believe that it is in the best interest of his administration to reserve a share of that wealth for the Natives.

The Native interests are also puzzled by the letter. In his letter, Miller said his reassessment of position is largely made "in light of the recent hearings of the House Committee in Alaska."

These hearings are believed to have been highly favorable to the position advocated by the AFN, and highly damaging to the Miller Administration's position.

The hearings were also an indication of widespread native

support for the AFN, and of solid unity among Natives in pursuing a favorable land settlement.

In view of this issue as a rallying point in unifying Natives into a formidable political block, and in view of rapidly approaching statewide elections, a change in policy by the Miller Administration is almost inevitable.

The letter, some Natives feel, may be less meaningful than it appears at first glance.

Natives insist that they be allowed to select lands which have been tentatively approved to the state. They also want a perpetual royalty on mineral revenues.

Above all, the AFN would like full native control of proceeds from the land settlement.

If, as Miller indicates, the state were to dispose of lands to native villages and would legislate some form of revenue sharing, there would be no assurance that the Natives could administer the grants.

More importantly, if the state were to grant land to the villages, this would acknowledge that the state owns the land.

The premise for the land claims is that the Natives own the land, and their title to that land has never been extinguished.

To accept the offer of the state's grant would be to negate the argument that, in the first place, the land belongs to Natives and is not available for the state to dispose.

Still, the Native leadership in Washington is reluctant to react strongly toward the Miller letter. Strong official reaction by the AFN may not come about until Miller spells out his position in detail.

Contacted by the Tundra Times, AFN first Vice-President John Borbridge stated, "Not being conversant with all implications of the letter, it appears the Governor is reassessing the position of the state in regard to the AFN position."

"While the particular details of the change remain to be worked out, it is encouraging to know that the Governor realizes the need for a change in the state position."

The AFN leaders say the native position is firmed, and has been firmed consistently since the position paper was drafted last May.

To date, the Miller Administration has yet to recognize the native position and enter into discussion with native leaders.

They are hopeful that the state's coming policy shift may afford the opportunity for the AFN, for the first time, to approach the Governor and discuss implications of all settlement proposals.

The AFN strongly feels that the best possible settlement for the Natives would also be in the best interests of the state, and for the future economic development of Alaska.

The Governor's message is unclear. Until it is further clarified, the AFN will find it extremely difficult to respond, and to react either favorably or unfavorably toward the Miller position.