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Turmoil Dots AFN Convention, Tempers Quiet Down

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It lasted three days, exploding on the last afternoon in a swirl of charges and counter-charges. Village representatives

were upset. Land claims this... What do we get? Or, most important, what will our people lose?

As the sixth Annual convention of the Alaska Federation of

Natives ended in Fairbanks Sunday, AFN delegates came to grips with the growing closeness of a final land claims settlement and what it will mean.

They voted their support of

President Don Wright's management of the land claims lobby in Congress—and voted to recess until a land claims bill is passed by the House and Senate.

Wright brought to the con-

vention, along with a request for its mandate, a promise from President Nixon to veto any land claims bill that does not satisfy the native people.

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REGIONAL LEADER—Focused against the map of Alaska, ASNA President Joseph Upicksoun explained the actions of his region last week to questioners from the floor of the AFN convention.

AFN Convention . . .

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"The President has given us a verbal commitment not to sign the final bill till it is approved by the Alaska Federation of Natives," Wright told the convention.

In a month, or six weeks, or however long it takes, they will reconvene in Anchorage for a final decision.

The mandate to support Wright, and to reaffirm the AFN position on a 60 million acres 500 million dollar land settlement, came after a tumultuous final session just a few hours after the credentials committee certified the authority of the convention to open formal proceedings.

For two and a half days more than 200 village delegates had listened to panels, votes to support from Alaska's Governor, Congressman and Democratic Senator and seemingly endless repetitions of exhortations to organize, plan and train their people.

As the convention drew to a close, village delegates appeared alarmed that they might not be able to have their say before land claims were settled—forever. After all, their leaders had told them this was their last chance for input before the bill went before Congress.

In the midst of an excited session with attacks upon the President, the board and Congress, AFN President Don Wright took a vote to recess and left the room.

In the confusion that followed, vice president Phillip Guy took the podium and called to order what has been termed a "rump session." About 90 per cent of the village delegates present voted to call the session into order and voiced their fears.

Then, as tempers lowered and a resolution quickly passed supporting Wright and the AFN bill, the problem became how to get Don Wright to return to the podium. The dilemma was solved in half an hour by excluding the press and all non-natives and reconvening as an executive session of the AFN Board—with more than 200 native onlookers.

Two brief resolutions passed before the convention recessed till its next meeting in Anchorage. The AFN voted to support the Alaska State Human Rights Commission's Alaska Plan and to approve the \$330,000 AFN budget for the next fiscal year.

The AFN agreed to pay for a delegate from each village to attend the convention session in Anchorage.

Many village delegates are just beginning to realize what they will lose under the land claims bills, said ASNA President Joe Upicksoun on Monday.

"They all want to say, this is my land, I want it," Upicksoun said. "But the Convention was not structured to let them say it."

AFN President Don Wright repeatedly came out during the

weekend in support of the ASNA's right to file its suit against the Interior Department contesting tentative approval of state lands.

"The intervention of the ASNA is clearly a solid lawsuit based on aboriginal title. Its effect is being heard around the world."

At Saturday's session Alaska's two Democrats in Congress pledged to support whatever position the AFN takes.

"Whatever you decide I would not only carry, I would be happy and honored to carry," Alaska Senator Mike Gravel told the convention.

Congressman Nick Begich feared, however, that the AFN might withdraw its support from a land claims bill in the House at the last minute to see if delay might bring a great settlement. He told the AFN that he must have a commitment from the AFN not to block the bill on the House floor if the bill is to be acted upon this session.

"Whatever your decision is, I'll abide by it. But I can assure you that no bill could ever come out of that committee (the House Rules Committee) unless I made that commitment," Begich said.

John Borbridge, Tlingit-Haida Central Council President had reminded the group that last year there was no House bill, and a Senate bill providing only 10 million acres.

"We are on the verge of victory, but we must be aware of legislative devices that will be offered to protect us from ourselves. We are all for one. As long as we are together, don't forget to say Native land rights—not claims," said Borbridge.

As the House and Senate bills draw close—the debate intensifies. Both Begich and Gravel predicted action within a month. The AFN plan appears to be to concentrate their effort on the conference committee—where Alaska's legislators will be less of a tiny minority. Then, their last recourse will be appeal to President Nixon.

"Whatever you think of the pending settlement, you'd better look upon it as forever," Tlingit Jim Thomas had reminded the Convention on Friday.

"For once the Congress acts, bless your advisors, it will take a miracle to undo what Congress will accomplish this year.

"Alaska natives, with their expertise, consider themselves 'too good' to look upon this coming settlement as a treaty—because it would make them too much like the Indians."

"This is a most important convention," Thomas emphasized. "You have grave decisions to make for now, at last you must show what you are made of and you must stand ready to accept the responsibility of what your future people shall have and enjoy and what they shall not have and for which they shall curse you."