

Stevens fights for creation of Native panel

Going may be tough

by Alexandra J. McClanahan

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The Alaska Congressional Delegation is running into difficulty in getting a bill passed in this session of Congress calling for the creation of a federal-state commission on Alaska Native problems, according to Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska.

"We believe we'll get it through," Stevens said Thursday in a teleconference with Alaska reporters from his Washington, D.C., office, but he noted that Congressman George Miller, D-Calif., is attempting to halt the bill.

Stevens said his hopes for passage of the bill, however, have been bolstered by support from Sen. Daniel K. Inouye, D-Hawaii, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs.

Inouye has taken the provisions of the bill introduced earlier this year by Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, and made them an amendment to a bill pertaining mostly to Indians in Arizona, called the "Indian Law Enforcement Bill."

The Alaska Native federal-state commission would be funded by \$300,000 in federal funds and \$300,000 in state funds. Gov. Steve Cowper has already indicated strong support for the bill and has pledged his support in getting the state financing.

Grants or other private funds also may be sought.

Murkowski introduced the bill in the Senate last summer, after a report was released by the Alaska Federation of Natives, entitled "A Call to Action." That report detailed Alaska Native problems, such as alcohol abuse, unemployment, inadequate housing,

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low scores on standardized education tests taken by Alaska Natives and others.

Similar legislation was introduced in the House by Congressman Don Young, R-Alaska.

Among other issues discussed by Stevens was a proposed "no net loss" national wetlands policy that could have a major impact on slowing development in Alaska.

Stevens noted that the policy has merit in the Lower 48 where the nation has sustained a 50 percent loss in wetlands. The senator said the policy didn't make sense for Alaska, however, because about half the state is wetlands, and less than 1 percent of such areas have been lost.

"I don't think they really had Alaska in mind," he said. "We're doing our best to deal with it."

Stevens also was asked about a recent decision by Soviet officials, effectively putting a halt to flights across the Bering Straits. The Soviets are requiring that Bering Air, which charts flights between Nome and the Soviet Far East, have a Soviet navigator on-board. Such a change is considered too expensive.

The senator said he was told Thursday that two flights would be allowed — Thursday and Friday — and that talks on ironing out the differences would continue.

"We think there's more at stake here," he said, adding that some officials believe the Soviets may be trying to leverage more Aeroflot flights to Anchorage.

Stevens also noted he was pleased with congressional action this year on Aleut reparations, including \$15.3 million this year awaiting presidential approval, as well as an additional \$5 million for the Community Health Aide Program in rural Alaska, bringing the program's total to \$17 million.