

State, national organizations seek tort reform legislation

by A.J. McClanahan

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Alaska Native regional and village corporations may increasingly find themselves the targets of lawsuits that threaten their land base, according to spokesmen for tort reform organizations.

"People who own land in Alaska increasingly will find it's the land people are trying to steal," said Jim Coyne, president of the American Tort Reform Association. "And the biggest threat is a lawsuit."

Coyne, a former congressman from Pennsylvania's 8th District, was touring Alaska recently in support of tort and civil justice system reform.

His visit was hosted by the Citizens Coalition for Tort Reform, an Alaskan group of more than 30 statewide organizations.

Ric Davidge, executive director of the Alaska group, predicted that one of the biggest problems Native corporations will face in the future will

be lawsuits regarding trespassing cases. A corporation may find itself liable if someone gets hurt on the corporation's land, even if that person is trespassing, he said.

Davidge said he is also concerned about rural health care, and the effects malpractice suits nationwide are having on physicians' malpractice insurance.

"Many rural doctors are now not practicing obstetrics and pediatrics because they can't afford insurance," he said. "Doctors are leaving rural Alaska."

Coyne said the burgeoning problem of lawsuits is exacerbated by the fact that people who sue often look for a defendant with money.

"This disease is coming from the Lower 48, and it's coming up here," he said.

Davidge explained that the Alaska organization is seeking legislative action this year to reduce the number of lawsuits.