

Hoonah hosts first hearing on 1991 legislation

by Kirk McAllister

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HOONAH — Native leaders from all over Southeast gathered in this picturesque logging and fishing village on Tuesday with a message for Sen. Frank Murkowski, (R-Alaska) — keep Native land in Native hands.

While there were differences over some issues, those testifying — everyone from corporation leaders to village Elders — said that the use and ownership of their land should be protected.

Murkowski went to Hoonah for the first of several public meetings on proposed amendments to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), the 1971 legislation that gave Alaska Natives title to 44 million acres of land and \$1 billion in cash. The Act also set up 13 regional and more than 200 village corporations.

After several years of work through the Alaska Federation of Natives, an umbrella group that has been the major spokesman for the state's 60,000 Natives, Alaska's Congressional delegation introduced a package of amendments to ANCSA in Congress last week.

A major focus of the amendments is the so-called 1991 issues, which

refer to the year that stock in Native corporations can be sold by shareholders.

Some of the major features in the ANCSA amendment package include:

- Allowing corporations to issue stock to Natives born after 1971. These "new Natives" were not provided for in the original Act.
- Extending restrictions on the sale of stock past 1991, the original deadline set by Congress.
- Allowing corporations to transfer some or all of their assets to another entity for protection from non-Native stock buyers.
- Extending protection of undeveloped corporation land from taxation.
- Giving corporations the option of granting rights to those shareholders who vote against the majority in such things as the sale of stock.

Byron Mallott, chief executive officer of Sealaska, told Murkowski that Congress, in reviewing ANCSA, should remember that some of the financial difficulties encountered by some Native corporations were because the federal government has

been slow in conveying land to the corporations.

Mallott said the Native corporations provided opportunities and jobs for Alaska Natives and non-Natives and have been a positive force in the state's economy.

"They (the Native corporations) offer great hope," Mallott said. "It is hope which can be dashed quickly should their stock become just another commodity in the capital market, the only purpose of which is to chase the most lucrative return regardless of the consequences to the economy and the people of our state."

Frank O. Williams, chairman of Huna Totem Corp., the village corporation of Hoonah, said that land ownership and stock ownership are tied together by ANCSA.

"We alive today are only the caretakers of the land," Williams said. "But the situation now is that if we lose the corporations we lose the land. A lot of people don't like that situation."

Carol McQueen, president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood Grand Camp, told Murkowski that Congress may have had unrealistic expectations of the claims act.

"To think that Alaska Natives could be assimilated into Western culture in

just 20 years is impossible," McQueen said. "For us the land has spiritual as well as material meaning."

Murkowski and the rest of Alaska's Congressional delegation have said that sovereignty (recognizing independent tribal authority) issues should not be mixed with the ANCSA amendment package. To pass Congress, a consensus is needed in the Native community; sovereignty and subsistence questions could cloud the issue, Murkowski said.

But several Tlingit Elders, including Robert James Sr., of Angoon, told Murkowski that tribal sovereignty rights were preserved even in the 1867 American agreement to purchase Alaska from Russia.

"As an Elder, I'm here to caution you about the nature of losing our subsistence rights and our land," James said. "We're the best subsistence managers in the world."

The testimony at the Hoonah meeting will become part of the record of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Murkowski said Congress intended ANCSA to be a "living document" that could be changed to fit changing needs. He said chances of the amendments' passage in Congress were good.