

Leaders Deliver Open Letter to Interior Secretary-designate

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Four Alaskan native leaders delivered on January 10, 1969, in Washington, D.C., an open letter to Governor Walter J. Hickel asking for a clear statement on vital issues pertaining to the lands and land rights of 55,000 Alaskan Natives—Eskimos, Indian and Aleut.

In delivering the letter, they acted under the authority given to them by the 19-member Board of Directors of the Alaska Federation of Natives at a meeting held in Anchorage, Alaska on

January 7, 1969.

The AFN is composed of 19 native organizations which represents the Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts who have their homelands in Alaska.

The four leaders stated that “they did not desire the letter to be construed as expressing opposition to the confirmation of the nomination of Governor Hickel as the Secretary of the Interior.

Governor Hickel has requested the active public support by the AFN of his confirmation.

Accordingly, they stated that “we consider it to be our duty to ask the governor for a statement of his views and proposed policies on certain matters which will have an immediate import on the lives and lands of the 55,000 natives of Alaska.

“We are asking for a public statement because after the date of his nomination as Secretary of Interior, the press has carried remarks made by Governor Hickel which may be construed as to be dangerous threats to the

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land and land rights of Alaskan Natives.

"We believe that it is desirable that these remarks by the Secretary of the Interior-designate be clarified. Millions of acres of lands in which Alaskan Natives claim the full beneficial are at stake.

"These are lands which the Alaskan natives and their ancestors have occupied and used for many centuries."

The State of Alaska under the direction of Governor Hickel has asserted the right to obtain title to these lands in complete defeat of the native title.

By reason of action taken by Secretary of the Interior Udall, the State of Alaska has been prevented from taking title to these lands, Secretary Udall's policy has been that the matter can and should be resolved by Congressional legislation—that pending such legislation the natives should not be dispossessed of their lands and land rights.

Governor Hickel has agreed that the matter should be resolved by Congressional legislation, but has maintained the position that the natives should suffer the dispossession of the lands and have trust and confidence that future legislation by Congress will provide an adequate solution.

The open letter also contained the following:

"By chance, it has come to our attention that during the past December the State made a series of selections of minerals lands to which the Native claim beneficial ownership, including approximately 3 million additional acres in the Arctic Slope region, more than 3 million acres in the Bristol Bay area, and more than 1 million in the Copper River Basin area.

"Though the purpose of these selections is to defeat the Native titles to these lands, and is accordingly of urgent concern to the Natives, we have not noted any announcements by the State to the Natives or to the public coincident with the making of these large selections.

"The failure of the State to publicize these selections at the time they were made is troublesome."

The four native leaders are Emil Notti, President of AFN; John Borbridge, First Vice President of AFN; Eben Hopson, Executive Director of the Arctic Slope Native Association and State Representative Willie Hensley of Kotzebue.

The four were in Washington, D.C. to attend a hearing on the confirmation of Governor Hickel.