

Native Leaders at NCIO Meeting

Alaska's native leaders questioned parts of President Nixon's legislative program at a regional meeting sponsored by the National Congress of American Indians (NCIO) in Fairbanks Friday.

The one-day meeting was chaired by Mrs. Laura Bergt, a member of the NCIO, and drew from 20 to 25 native participants.

The NCIO is an eight-member body appointed by the President to act as an advisor to him on Indian Affairs and to co-ordinate, evaluate, and innovate programs for Indians.

The President's legislative program consists of seven bills sent

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to Congress in July designed to give America's Indians greater control over the federal programs affecting them.

All of the bills were explained at the Friday meeting at the Chamber of Commerce, with a measure to establish an assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian and Territorial Affairs drawing considerable comments.

Currently Indian concerns come under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is located under the office of the Assistant Secretary for ~~Public Land Management~~. The bill, if passed, would place Indian affairs in a position of greater importance.

Tim Wallis of the Fairbanks Native Association asked what the possibility would be of having the assistant secretary elected by the people he represents.

Bob Robertson, executive director of the NCIO, replied that there would be no chance. It is the prerogative, obligation, and responsibility of the President to make such appointments, he said.

Wallis explained that he thought the creation of an assistant secretary for Indian Affairs was a good move but that he was concerned because the position would be a political one.

Robertson replied that the administration was committed to finding the best man for the job, whether Republican or Democrat, or Independent and would not be playing politics with the appointment.

Al Ketzler, president of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, disagreed that the position would not be political and expressed concern that the President would have a hard time finding a Republican Indian.

John Borbridge, vice president of the Alaska Federation of Natives, added that he hoped there would be an opportunity for Indians to make recommendations and to have as much input as possible in the decision.

Most of the other bills were explained with little discussion. Meetings such as the one in Fairbanks have been held all over the nation. They were called for by Pres. Nixon in order to introduce the legislative program to Indians and to establish a dialogue between them and the administration.

In turn, native leaders present at the Fairbanks meeting are supposed to explain the legislative program to their regionals and villages and to make note of criticisms and recommendations. Such recommendations are to be presented in final form at another regional meeting of the NCIO in November with the goal of incorporating, as much as possible, the suggestions into the Indian legislation.

The legislation stands virtually no chance of coming up before Congress adjourns this year, Robertson said. Thus, it will be introduced again in the next Congress following incorporation of Indian comments. It was sent to Congress with this in mind, Robertson said, just to bring the legislation to the surface and draw Congress' attention to the need for such bills.

"These pieces of legislation are not cast in bronze, he stressed, "and are subject to change."

In discussing the bills before the meeting, the NCIO director said, he thought the measures had a good chance of passing next year.

In spite of the strong opposition that will come from some congressmen who do not want to give Indians more power, support will be great enough to get the bills through, Robertson predicted. He attributed this to the broad base of support for the Indian cause among non-Indian people, the support of the administration, congressional support from both parties, and, most important, the Pan Indianism movement that is uniting Indians nationwide on issues relevant to all of them.

In addition to the bill creating an assistant secretary, other bills would allow Indian tribes and communities to assume control of Interior Department and Indian Health Service programs and of Johnson-O'Malley (education) funds. Also an Indian Trust Counsel authority would be established to provide independent legal representation and a loan fund for Indian economic development programs would be increased.