

Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton Makes Significant Visit

During the first week of August, Rogers C. B. Morton, Secretary of the Interior, made a significant visit to Alaska, speaking in both Anchorage and Fairbanks, meeting with top Native leaders, and flying north over the Brooks range along the proposed pipeline route.

Morton's was the third such visit by top federal officials within a two week time span. On July 18-19, the state saw the arrival of William D. Ruckelshaus, head of the federal Environmental Protection Agency. On July 23-24, the Vice-President of the United States, Spiro Agnew, made a brief tour.

All three men spoke at length on the issue of land — land use, land protection, and land claims — continuing a long-existent dialogue between the Native Alaskan and the federal government.

Morton, like his predecessors, spoke of the opportunities in Alaska for planned "orderly growth . . . which will preserve the integrity of the delicate Arctic environment."

As trustee of the public lands in Alaska, Morton outlined his department's past actions and present intents. Like Agnew, Morton reminded Alaskans of the importance of North Slope oil to the national security.

"Without the pipeline," he said, there would be "increasing dependence upon the politically unstable oil-rich nations of the Middle East."

He reaffirmed his intent to proceed with the pipeline, estimating that court litigation now pending might be settled

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within 18 months.

"Twenty-two thousand jobs," said the Secretary, "will be created in Alaska in connection with the pipeline construction and a gross payroll of \$800 million will be generated."

Morton spoke of another area of concern, "the whole business of Native claims and land withdrawals. I know that for many in Alaska these issues are very difficult. The development of the pipeline and the future economic course of this great state are intertwined with these issues."

He pointed to the role of the newly formed Land Use Planning Commission ordered by the Act, stating that it would lay the groundwork for land use practices "unmatched anywhere in the world."

Morton said the Commission would protect the Alaskan Native people and "their share of a piece of the action."

The Commission has been under attack for appointing only one Native member, all that was legally required under the Act.

Questioned as to why more than the stipulated one Native member had not been chosen Morton said, "What I needed was objectivity."

Speaking at the first meeting of the Land Use Planning Commission in Anchorage, August 1, Cecil Barnes of the Chugach region expressed concern to Sec. Morton about plans to sign over 802 acres of land near Valdez.

The Anchorage Daily Times reported this land was to be signed over to the state of Alaska to be put up for competitive bid. It was considered to be a strategic location for the terminal for the trans-Alaska pipeline system and could presumably be bought by the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company at a cost of perhaps millions of dollars.

"The land in question," said Barnes, "has been set aside for potential selection by the village to Tatitlek, part of the Chugach Native Corporation."

Barnes reminded the Commission of a remark made by Harry Carter, its only Native member, that the commission's "very existence was due to the Alaska NATIVE Land Claims Settlement Act."

Expressing concern for the signing over of "no conflict" lands, Barnes warned that the "no conflict" concept was "drawn from lines on a map; a map which was very hastily drawn in order to meet a very tight time requirement. The Bureau of Land Management," he said, "will readily admit that

there were drafting errors in the plotting of the complex 'set aside' system."

"Obviously, there are deficiencies and conflicts that must be considered," said Barnes, "and there are conflicts that do not show on a piece of paper drawn up by somebody in Washington."

Barnes requested that Secretary Morton see that no further lands be released without consulting the leaders of nearby regions and then only if the land to be released in no way could be considered as a makeup for the protested "in lieu" selections.

The intertwining Morton spoke of between Native land interests and the pipeline are indisputably present and "objectivity" may be a hard quality to come by in Alaska.

Gene Guess, candidate for the U.S. Senate, responded to Morton's signing over of a quarter million acres of Alaska land to the state during his visit as "the most cynical instance of political profiteering I have seen."

"Morton himself," said Guess, "admitted in one breath that the land signed over was never involved in the present land freeze issues, and in the next breath characterized the action as a thaw in the land freeze."

"I think it is obvious that Morton is deliberately confusing the issue in hope of soothing the many points of abrasion between Alaska and the Interior Department."

"Morton himself urges us to avoid partisan activities in our approach to the land issue, yet the whole purpose of his visit suggests political motives."

The lands signed over, said Guess, were selected prior to Sec. Udall's 1969 land freeze, and were subject to no conflicting claims. They represent "less than one-third of one per cent of the land Alaska has filed on. To say that this minor action, unrelated to the main federal-state land issue, symbolizes a thaw in the land freeze is like striking a match in December at Point Barrow and saying it symbolizes a spring thaw."

"This was nothing more than an election year ploy by Nixon's administration to win votes from outside interests which do not want the freeze resolved in favor of Alaskans."

As he spoke in Fairbanks, a large shadow of the Secretary of the Interior, Rogers C. B. Morton, was projected on the wall. It seemed to presage a future shadow falling over the difficult choices ahead.