

Indian leaders: *Time to light switchboards!*

***Congress hit for breaching
'Contract with First Americans,'
Deer protests gag order***

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

Indian leaders will ask President Clinton to veto the 1996 federal budget if a conference committee does not restore funds for Native American programs.

Speaking Monday morning on Native America Calling, they accused Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt of preventing Assistant Secretary Ada Deer from defending the Indian program budget on Capitol Hill, while other Interior agencies were allowed to lobby for their funds. Following a weekend strategy session, they called on Native Americans across the country to plug in to the political process.

Situation urgent

"Indians have to call in this week. It can't wait," said gaiashkibos, president of the National Congress of American Indians, on the nationwide radio call-in program. "It can't wait till next week. I would like to see the switchboards light up."

He added that neither Babbitt nor Deer "have been out there forcefully enough from early on" to fight for Indian programs, most of which are funded through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the agency overseen by Deer.

It was not immediately clear why Babbitt had restrained Deer from pressuring members of Congress for a more favorable budget.

Committee meets this week

The Senate has proposed cutting the BIA budget by 15 percent over fiscal year 1995. This would put programs 23 percent below the funding level requested by President Bill Clinton. The House has proposed a cut that is smaller but still severe. A conference committee comprised of members from both chambers is meeting this week to try and reconcile their differences.

Compacting funds for Alaska could take 30 percent hit

Niles Cesar, BIA area director in Juneau, said if the Senate budget proposal prevails, he will have to abolish 37 positions and leave an-

Page 12, please

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Inside this issue:

Village Voices **Page 4**

Wolf Sterilization **Page 5**

OCS sales planned **Page 7**

NSB, NBA form housing team **Page 9**

Nome Eskimo Community **Page 12**

. . . Native leaders call for phone, fax campaign

Continued from page 1

other 27 vacant positions unfilled. He predicted that funds for tribal contracting and compacting in Alaska would have to be cut by about 30 percent.

"It would likely slow down new contracting to a trickle," said Cesar. "And, we would not be surprised to see some tribes retrocede programs back to the bureau."

Cesar said the practical effect of the cuts is that services, whether provided directly by the bureau, or under contracts/compacts by

tribes, would take longer to provide. Getting blood quantum certificates, completing Native allotment transactions and numerous other activities would be delayed by weeks, he said.

Deer calls cuts devastating

In an interview with *Tundra Times* last week, Deer spoke angrily about being muzzled when so much is at stake.

"It's rather frustrating for me as an advocate at this dire time. The severity of the cuts is devastating. Both the House and Sen-

ate made deep cuts in the President's request," said Deer. She noted that the request was made on the basis of serious, legitimate needs.

"American Indians and Alaska Natives have been shortchanged by the government for years. These are not abstractions. In socio-economic terms, we are at the bottom. The cuts will hurt tribal communities. They will hurt individuals. We will not be assisting the tribes to enter the 21st century in a positive and productive

way."

Cuts hit close to home

According to press reports, Congressional action has forced the bureau to prepare layoff slips for up to 25 percent of its employees in order to absorb the intended cuts.

One of the individuals already hurt by the cuts is Carolyn Hogan, who was driving her car in Anchorage on Monday, listening to Native America Calling. Shaken with emotion and frustration, she pulled off the road and phoned in

to relate how she had already lost her financial aid to continue paralegal training. When moderator Bernadette Chato asked what she was going to do now, Hogan replied "I'm organizing protests."

In fact, the Athabascan/Tahltan mother of three was on her way to a demonstration at local BIA headquarters near 16th and C streets to register her protest. Pickets staked signs on the building grounds and marched along C Street asking motorists to honk in support.