

Land Transfer Delays Will Be Explored

Interior Department

'Maladministration' is blamed for Conveyance Delays

Rep. John F. Sieberling, Democrat of Ohio, has announced that the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs will conduct oversight hearings to explore delays in conveying land to Alaska Natives. Sieberling, chairman of the Subcommittee on Federal Oversight of Alaska Lands, said his panel will hold an open hearing on the subject on July 21 in Washington, D.C.

Referring to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 which provided for delivery of more than 40 million acres of public land to Alaska Natives, Sieberling stated that "now, almost six years later, very little land was transferred to Alaska Natives. I believe that we must make a serious effort to determine why this is so, and to speed things up."

Sieberling noted that a recent report of the American Indian Policy Review Commission blamed "maladministration" in the Department of Interior for holding up transfer of lands to the Native groups. He said the subcommittee would be interested in finding out the reasons for the delays and to determine what can be done to eliminate further delays.

John Borbridge, Jr., a Native leader prominent for his efforts to secure passage of the settlement act, indicated that he was highly pleased with the concern demonstrated by the Congress in this critical matter. "The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was enacted with the purpose of resolving with finality the long-standing aboriginal land claims of the Alaska Natives," he said.

Borbridge, president of the Sealaska Corporation, Juneau, added, "This has not happened. This issue of conveyance of title is vital to all Natives and vital to Alaska. I am pleased that, as a commissioner of the American Indian Policy Review Commission, I was instrumental in obtaining inclusion of the recommendations for accelerating the current low rate of land title conveyance under the settlement act."

Native Lands ...

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Sieberling's subcommittee is currently holding hearings on a number of bills which would implement another provision of the settlement act by designating public lands in Alaska to be national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, wild and scenic rivers and wilderness areas. He said that a number of witnesses have stressed that failure of the government to transfer promised land to Natives was an obstacle to the overall resolution of questions raised by these bills.

Borbridge concluded, "I commend chairman Sieberling and the Congress for this explicit demonstration of its concern that all Natives receive what was promised, in a fair time frame, under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. I am delighted with this clear indication that my work on the American Indian Policy Review Commission is already bearing fruit."