

Bush administration opposes Alaska Native commission

A hearing last month in Washington, D.C., on the creation of a federal-state commission to look into Alaska Native problems turned into a clash between Alaska Native organizations and the Department of the Interior.

Interior officials said the commission was not the answer, and although Alaska Natives generally supported the commission, several raised questions about its structure.

The Aug. 3 hearing by the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, chaired by Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, was called to take testimony on the proposed Joint State/Federal Commission on Policies and Programs Affecting Alaska Natives.

The idea for the commission came as a result of the Alaska Federation of Natives' report requested by Inouye and entitled *Status of Alaska Natives: A Call for Action*.

The AFN report describes the social, health and economic problems that Alaska Natives are faced with today.

Richard Stitt, representing the Tlingit and Haida Indian tribes of Alaska, said T&H favors such a commission but objects to the fact that the legislation calls for only three of the 14 voting members to be Alaska Natives. Stitt said three people would not adequately represent Alaska Native.

The legislation calls for a commission of 14 voting members, seven of whom would be appointed by the president and seven by the governor. Although the legislation would require only the president to appoint Alaska Natives, Gov. Steve Cowper has pledged to appoint at least three Alaska Natives to represent the state.

The Alaska Native Health Board, the Association of Regional Health Directors, the Kodiak Area Native Association, the North Pacific Rim and the Sitka Community Association also said the legislation would not adequately represent Alaska Native views.

The Association of Village Council Presidents said the commission must

be structured to allow "meaningful participation by Alaska Natives."

AVCP said Alaska Natives themselves — not the president or the governor — are in a better position to appoint the Native members of the commission, and they said Alaska Natives should constitute at least seven members of the commission.

In addition, the Bethel-based agency called for an eighth Native commissioner, possibly appointed by the other seven Native commissioners. Ideally, AVCP said the eighth state commissioner should be an elder known throughout the state.

Will Mayo, representing the Tanana Chiefs Conference, was skeptical about whether the commission would be an appropriate response to AFN's report.

Eddie F. Brown, assistant secretary for Indian Affairs, Department of Interior, said the commission is not the proper vehicle to address the problems.

Brown said these funds can be better spent assisting the Alaska Natives now, rather than being spent to fund another commission.

Brown suggested an alternative: The formation of a cross-agency task force composed of appropriate federal agencies, working in partnership with the governor of Alaska and three representatives picked by the Alaska Natives.

The task force would immediately review all existing studies relating to policies and programs serving Alaska Natives. Brown believes this would be a more efficient and economic resolution to these problems.

Although Brown and the Bush administration oppose the proposed Native commission, AFN spokesmen said they think the legislation will pass. They said they hope the commission will be in operation by Oct. 1, the beginning of the new federal fiscal year.

Earlier last month the state of Alaska agreed to support the amount of \$300,000 in state funds for the Native commission.

