

BLM Land Claims Record Called 'Disgraceful' and 'Shocking'

BY: LONE E. JANSON
ALASKA NATIVE
FOUNDATION

Washington, D.C. - The performance of the Bureau of Land Management in transferring land to Alaska Natives has been "shocking" and "disgraceful."

This is the view of Congressman John Sieberling (D-Ohio), chairman of the House Subcommittee on General Oversight and Alaska Lands.

Sieberling made his remarks after Dan Alex of Eklutna testified that his village corporation has had to spend 50.3% of the monies it has received under the Act in litigation, just to obtain the land it is entitled to by law.

Alex told the committee that at the present rate of land transfer, it will take 58 years for Eklutna to get all its interim conveyances, and 2,500 years to get the patents.

In two days of hearings last

week in Washington, D.C., the subcommittee heard a parade of witnesses from Alaska Native regional and village corporations outline the problems related to the delay in land conveyance, and call for the adoption of the recommendations of the American Indian Policy Review Commission, especially the portions calling for transfer of all Native lands by December 31, 1978 and the abolishment of the easement provisions of the Act.

Major problems cited over and over again by those testifying were: the attitude of the Department; delays, easements, navigability, and the tremendous cost of litigations.

Guy Martin, Assistant Secretary for Land and Water Resources of the Department of Interior, told the subcommittee that he had initiated a full review of land claims matters in

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an effort to determine where the delays are occurring and what can be done to overcome them.

He said that two meetings have already been held, with all the interested parties in attendance: Natives, the State, Land Use Planning Commission, and Department personnel. Other meetings will be held if necessary. A final report will be prepared, hopefully by September 15, when the subcommittee has scheduled another round of D-2 lands.

John Borbridge, president of Sealaska Corporation and a member of the Indian Policy Review Commission, told the committee that the erosion of the value of the settlement and the economic costs to the Natives resulting from delays in conveyance are "staggering."

Figures furnished the committee by the Library of Congress research team indicate that the loss to the Natives by inflation and earnings foregone amounted to some \$226 million since passage of the Act.

By far the most poignant and distressing testimony on the human cost of the delays came from the various villages, such as Galena, Ruby, and Hoonah. Because of the need for land for village expansion and the con-

struction of municipal facilities of various sorts, these villages all await the 1,280 acre reconveyances required under section 14 (c) of the Act. But because Interior has not conveyed the land to the village corporations, these corporations cannot in turn make the reconveyances to the municipality. A host of vitally needed improvements are stalled: schools, airports, housing projects, and municipal buildings. Private businesses cannot get title, hence cannot get financing.

The greatest stumbling block is easements. An estimated 115,000 acres will be taken from the Natives for this purpose. Sieberling suggested that legislation might be introduced calling for the Department of Interior to provide "in lieu" lands to make up for this loss.

He said his committee will communicate with the Department of Interior urging immediate conveyance of village core townships as a number one priority.

"It is my hope and intent to resolve the D-2, easements, and Native land transfer problems during this session of Congress," he asserted. "But if adjustments have to be made, they will not be at the expense of the Natives; I am committed to that."