

WHITE HOUSE MAY ALTER POLICY

Drama Tinges Meeting On Claims Between Agnew, Native Leaders

Four Alaskan Native leaders met with Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton and other administration officials on Friday (March 12) in a meeting which may alter administration policy on Alaska native land claims.

The two hour meeting took place Friday afternoon in the White House offices of Vice President Agnew. The vice president arranged the meeting at the request of Laura Bergt, member of the National Council on Indian Opportunity, which he chairs.

He agreed to the meeting while attending the NCIO conference in Kansas City last week.

Laura Bergt described the meeting to the Tundra Times as representing a "dramatic shift" in administration policy. Her account of the meeting follows:

Besides the Vice President and the Secretary of the Interior, Mrs. Bergt said, administration officials included Assistant Interior Secretary Harrison Loesch; Fred Bracken, the Interior Department Legal Counsel; Boyd Rasmussen of the BLM, and others.

The Alaskan Natives were represented by Al Ketzler of the Tanana Chiefs, State Senator Ray Christianson, AFN President Don Wright and Laura Bergt.

"The prime purpose of this meeting was to allow the Alaskan Natives, for the first time, to present their side to the highest level of the federal government and to allow a full dialogue with the federal officials on the merits of our demands," said Mrs. Bergt.

"The Vice President opened the meeting by stating that in his conversation with President Nixon, the President wished to emphasize the spirit of his Indian message to Congress of July 8, 1970 which stressed Indian self-determination and that the settlement of the Alaska native land claims was very important. He also stated that for too long a terrible injustice has been done

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to the American Indian.

"It's time to stop the rhetoric and to start acting," the Vice President said.

"The Vice President then turned the meeting over to AFN President Don Wright who gave a 15 minute presentation. They were very, very moved with Don's opening speech. He started from the very beginning—when the Natives of Alaska were there and the Russians came—and went up to the present moment when we're really fighting for our native land claims.

"He clearly explained why we're asking for 60 million acres, 500 million dollars compensation, 2 per cent in perpetuity and the 12 regional concept. He did such a beautiful job that he visibly moved everyone in that room including the three Natives who were there—who already understood our side of the story. I really have to take my hat off to him; he did such a good job.

"No absolute promises were made but it was obvious that the administration's position was not acceptable by everyone present

at the meeting. Because of the meeting, there was a dramatic shift in their position.

"Secretary Morton said that in the last few days he has personally researched and re-evaluated his whole way of thinking on the native land claims legislation. This weekend, the administration is drafting their bill and agreed to have AFN counsel present during the entire drafting of the bill.

"The meeting was above-board and it was very, very open on both sides. A lot of questions were asked Vice President Agnew and Secretary Morton and the others.

"They didn't know what we were talking about before. They heard a lot of figures thrown around about what the natives were asking for. After this meeting, they understand why we're asking for what we're demanding.

"It was a great meeting and I think represents a dramatic shift in their way of thinking so far as the native land claims situation is concerned," Mrs. Bergt concluded.