

Final Opportunity

(Editor's Note: In a form of a foreword on a separate sheet of paper for the NATIVE ALASKA: DEADLINE FOR JUSTICE compiled and published by Hackett and Associates of New York, a public relations firm engaged by the Association on American Indian Affairs, Inc., William Byler, executive director of the AAIA, wrote the following commentary on the natives of Alaska and their efforts to resolve the land issue. The timeliness of Byler's writing is without question as well as that of NATIVE ALASKA: DEADLINE FOR JUSTICE that is being distributed nationally.)

By WILLIAM BYLER

In Alaska today, our Government has its final opportunity to deal justly and generously with aboriginal Americans, by honoring commitments the United States made over 100 years ago to the Alaskan Native people. The Natives of Alaska are threatened with the loss of their ancestral lands, which their forefathers conquered countless centuries ago, which they understand to be legally theirs under the time-honored doctrine of original Indian title, and upon which most of the Native people continue to depend for life-giving sustenance.

The urgency of the Alaskan Native land issue is underlined by the current oil boom on Alaska's North Slope. Recent press accounts of the oil boom have focused almost entirely on economic and financial implications. To the Natives, the rush for mineral riches threatens their lands with expropriation and their way of life with extinction. The issue is whether the Native peoples will now be disinherited and pauperized, with the State's vast mineral wealth going only to newcomers and oil companies, or whether the United States Government will grasp a fleeting yet historic opportunity for justice.

Legislation is currently pending before the House and Senate Committees on Interior and Insular Affairs to provide a comprehensive and just settlement of the Natives legal rights to their land under terms recommended by the Alaska Federation of Natives. The AFN is a statewide organization whose democratically selected officers speak for all the Native peoples. These bills, HR 14212 in the House, and S 3041 in the Senate, incorporate the AFN position.

In exchange for the final extinguishment of their Indian title to 90 per cent of Alaskan land, the Natives are seeking a settlement which is not only just, but which assures them a viable future and a meaningful role in the development of their state.

They are asking Congress to honor its promises, dating from 1884, by granting legal title to only 40 million acres out of the 375 million Alaskan acres they possessed before the white man came.

They are asking for compensation, in the amount of \$500,000,000 for their surrender of legal claims to the rest of Alaska. This amounts to about \$1.50 per acre for over 300 million acres of vastly rich land.

They are asking for a royalty of 2% on all revenues from lands to which they surrender their rights, as a reasonable means of assuring Native participation in Alaskan economic development.

The Natives of Alaska urgently need the active support of all Americans in their quest for justice and opportunity.