

Submerged lands regulations changed

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
Tundra Times

Alaska Native corporations will be able to select from one to two million acres more because of a change in federal regulations governing land conveyancing procedures.

U.S. Interior Secretary James Watt on Monday announced he is amending the Bureau of Land Management's "submerged lands" regulations which, according to many Alaskans and Native corporations have discriminated against the state in the measurement of areas conveyed to Native corporations and the state by the federal government.

At a Monday luncheon of the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, Watt said he would seek to change the regulations to bring them in line with regulations governing similar federal-to-state conveyances in the Lower 48.

Under current regulations governing Alaska, all submerged land under non-navigable rivers or lakes conveyed to the state or Native corporations were charged against the Statehood land entitlements or to Regional Corporations under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

However, in the Lower 48, those who seek federal lands are not charged for lands under lakes in excess of 50 acres or lands under rivers more than 198 feet wide.

"This might not seem like a big thing, but by treating Alaska the same as we treat Arizona or Utah or Nevada, the state of Alaska could gain up to four and six million acres and Natives could gain up to one and two million acres."

Watt said the action "will terminate another vestige of

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U.S. Secretary of the Interior James Watt visits with Byron Mallot, Chairman of Sealaska, Sam Kito, Chairman of the Alaska Federation of Natives, and Agafon Krukoff, Chairman of the Aleut Corporation during a meeting with AFN last Monday. The meeting was closed to all reporters and photographers.

Photo by Patty Ginsburg, AFN

Submerged

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past federal policies which treated the state of Alaska inequitably."

Watt's proposal will require public notice and comment.

He said he also will ask Congress to amend the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act to eliminate a statute of limitations on appeals of Federal decision concerning submerged land conveyances.

Watt's recommendation also takes into account assurances on public access of waterways by assuring use of motorboats and floatplanes on federal lands; use of liberal navigability criteria to assure that state interests in waterways are protected; and concerns acquisition of recreational easements from Native corporations.

Such easements have been acquired on the North Slope and Prince William Sound.

Additional easements are being sought in the Bristol Bay and Glennallen areas.

Patty Ginsburg, a spokeswoman for the Alaska Federation of Natives said, "Naturally we are happy about this. It's something the AFN has been working on for a long time."