

Gruening Asks for Claims Legislation

(Editor's Note: Senator Ernest Gruening's release below, came out simultaneously with the Tundra Times lead story last week in which the Arctic Slope Native Association took exception to the Senator's stand on Native land claims. The Association stated in part:

"... To further refute Senator Gruening's statements that land claims retard the state, let him look at Tyonek. Here native communal capital has been put to use to benefit the entire state ...

"... The native, as long as he remains landless, must therefore remain taxless; and being deprived of his land by the Federal Government, it is the responsibility of the government to either recognize his land claims so they may become taxable or provide the best of educational facilities for him in lieu thereof...")

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WASHINGTON, May 13 — Senator Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska) is asking the Interior Department to draft legislation which would ascertain the validity of claims for lands in interior Alaska by Alaskan Natives. The senator announced today the legislation will be introduced by him in this session of Congress as soon as it is drafted.

The subject was raised by Senator Gruening in a meeting today of the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, of which he is a member. The meeting was attended by Commissioner Robert Bennett. Former Senator Arthur Watkins, chief commissioner of the Indian Claims Commission, was the principal witness.

Senator Gruening announced his intention to seek to ascertain the validity of those claims in Alaska which he had previously discussed with Commissioner Bennett.

"It is my hope," Senator Gruening said, "that we can establish their validity based on occupancy and use and a settlement based on a transfer of some land and a partial financial award may be obtainable. As Commissioner Bennett has correctly stated: 'I don't think land in and of itself is a solution to the problem of the Native people. I so publicly stated it at a meeting. . . about three or four weeks ago.'"

In the views expressed in the report of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs on the nomination of Commissioner Bennett, Senator Gruening attacked an existing policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to block the State of Alaska's land selection program authorized by the Statehood Act.

To date, he recorded, these objections by the Bureau of Indian Affairs have paralyzed action on 13 selections totaling 15,668,108 acres. He said it appeared to be bureau policy to block all other selections in the same manner.

Senator Gruening pointed out that this Interior Department policy impeded the State's program and development as well as the possibility of establishing Indian claims, and recommended that this obstructive procedure cease and that legislation to ascertain the validity of the claims be introduced without further delay.

In a subsequent meeting with Commissioner Bennett, Senator Gruening said that he would try to secure a combination of land and financial settlement.

"If the bill is introduced in the near future," he told the commissioner, "we can hold hearings on it in Alaska at the close of the 89th Congress and try to get the legislation enacted early in the next Congress."

At the hearings on the nomination of Bennett in April, Senator Gruening quoted a statement in the report of the President's Review Committee on Planning for Alaska headed by Joseph H. Fitzgerald, as follows:

"Western Alaska, the land west of Anchorage and Fairbanks, and north from Bristol Bay to the Arctic, is the home of the Aleuts, Eskimos and Indians. This is a land without a foothold in the 20th century, while other areas of Alaska not inhabited by Indians and Eskimos have moved ahead."

Senator Gruening followed this by quoting from a letter received from a former resident of that region, an Athabaskan Indian, who had been living in Los Angeles. She wrote as follows: "I have recently returned from a two weeks' vacation in Alaska. After an absence of ten years I find the culture is 100 years behind."

Senator Gruening continued: "This is the most serious problem that Alaska faces. It is not just an Indian problem; it is an Alaska problem. Nothing that we can do in other fields to improve our economy, to progress according to conventional terms of what progress means, can quickly cope with this problem because of its long neglect, and because of its special character."

The senator said he hopes that his proposals to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and his purpose to sponsor remedial legislation may tend toward a solution of this "most serious problem" and furnish relief to the Native population of interior Alaska.