

Stevens takes stand on 7(i)

We'd like to take this opportunity to publicly thank and support Sen. Ted Stevens for his stand on whether Section 7(i) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act applies to land trades currently being discussed by Alaska Native corporations and the Department of Interior.

Sen. Stevens said in a recent interview with the *Tundra Times* that this particular view is not a new one for him, that he has always felt this way. He conceded, however, that there are a number of important leaders who disagree with him.

It's unfortunate that the issue of these land exchanges involving lands in refuges throughout Alaska and subsurface rights in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has reached such a state of controversy. Statements by state officials, especially Department of Natural Resources Commissioner Judy Brady, have fanned the flames and in some cases totally misrepresented the truth.

Whether these trades should take place is a complex issue, tied into the whole decision on whether ANWR should be opened to oil and gas exploration and development. We find it hard to believe that development could actually be stopped if the United States' current need for oil continues, as it must.

That means that one of the most important things to do now, as the debate is going on, is to make sure regulations governing oil activities are developed to protect the important wildlife resources.

And we certainly have to agree with Sen. Frank Murkowski who said last week that one of the advantages of the land trades is that revenue from oil development would go into the hands of Native Alaskan corporations, rather than just oil companies. This money would mean much for the Native community.

At the same time, this issue of 7(i) reaches to the core of the reason for the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Some Native leaders, such as Sen. Willie Hensley of Kotzebue, have said it would be unfortunate if only a small minority of Alaska Natives shared in the benefits of oil development in ANWR. Spokesmen for the Native Lands Group, who are offering lands in the exchange, have asked Interior to make 7(i) a part of those talks. This group includes two regional corporations, Cook Inlet Region Inc. and The Aleut Corp., as well as 11 village corporations.

Earlier, Bill Horn, Department of Interior assistant secretary for fish, wildlife and parks, said Interior was loath to get into the issue of revenue sharing. "None of the lands are subject to 7(i)," he said.

We find it refreshing Sen. Stevens does not take this same stand. Although he says this stand is one he has always had, it is important that he is now making his voice heard on it.

These trades have become extremely controversial, and it looks as if they will require congressional approval. That's certainly going to be difficult to attain. At the same time, we feel confident that if they do go forward, Sen. Stevens will have his say and that *all* Alaska Natives will benefit as a result.