

Sen. Gravel Addresses Joint Session on Claims

(Editor's Note: U.S. Senator Mike Gravel Feb. 27 delivered a speech before a joint session of the Alaska State Legislature at the State Capitol of Juneau. Sen. Gravel covered three subjects: oil, native land claims issue, and the development of a communications system in Alaska. Although the other two subjects are of paramount importance to Alaska as well, we have excerpted the land claims section of Gravel's speech having in mind the impending legislation on native claims by Congress probably in the near future. The excerpt bears reading because it comes from a senatorial point of view.)

... Eighty-four years ago Congress said that the natives of Alaska had rights to the land they use and occupy. And Congress reserved for itself the right to decide how extensive those land rights were and how the federal government would deal with their disposition.

Congress, in my view, is finally prepared to make its decision.

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The climate in the senate appears excellent. The chairman of the Senate Interior Committee, Senator Jackson, is committed to a settlement. He firmly believes it should be a generous settlement and that it should come this year.

Let's analyze for a moment the importance of an early settlement—its importance to all of us, native and non-native alike.

Tens of thousands of Alaskans live in the rural areas of our state. They live in primitive housing. Statistically they are our nation's most likely candidates for disease and early death. They receive substandard education. Their traditional life, based on the use of the land for hunting, fishing, and trapping, is becoming less and less possible as a form of subsistence.

Each year tens of millions of dollars of state and federal funds are expended to assist native Alaskans. For the most part, the effort has been misdirected. The problems have been accentuated, not resolved. Those in the urban areas must pay taxes to sustain what is essentially an immoral and unjust form of paternalism.

Some progress has been made in recent years, most of it through the efforts of native leadership. They have forced us to work on ways for solving it. What they are saying is simply this: Give us a chance to lead our own lives, to be ourselves, to make our own way. We have problems greater than most people who live under the American Flag. But give us a grubstake and let us try to solve those problems.

The land claims are valid because the nation has an obligation to be just to the Alaska native. And it takes on even greater importance and urgency when we consider that the settlement, if it is adequate, should mean the end to extreme poverty in rural Alaska. It should mean the beginning of an opportunity for tens of thousands of Alaskans who at this moment are caught in a cultural and economic vice that has prevented them from sharing fully in the benefits that our society offers.

If the claims are not settled rapidly, here are the problems we will face:

- Title to land in Alaska will be in dispute at the time of our greatest opportunity for economic advancement.

- The Alaska native will miss the opportunity to be on the ground floor of that advancement and to grow with it.

- The frustration of failure will compound the problem, increase tensions and cloud our future.

- And all Alaska will suffer deeply.

The time is right for settlement. The Congress is prepared to deal with the question. The Alaska public favors a settlement and so does the national administration.

Many details remain to be resolved. The Federal Field Committee, under the leadership of Joe FitzGerald, has done an outstanding job in laying the groundwork for congressional action. That work will be translated into a bill that Senator Jackson plans to submit to Congress. I expect the Alaska Federation of Natives to propose another version of settlement.

And hearings and action on a bill should come quickly thereafter in the Senate.

I intend to work for the very best settlement that we can sell to Congress. I intend to devote a considerable portion of my time personally to this effort. I think that it is essential to understand that now is the time for decision and that the decision is likely to be the most just and honorable settlement the United States has ever made with any group of native Americans.

The critical element in a fast-moving situation such as this will be communications. The native leadership must remain in close contact with developments. It must be party to all decisions directly affecting a settlement. This will be costly, but there is no substitute for direct involvement by leaders of the Alaska Federation of Natives. They must be intimately directly involved.

And so I would ask this legislature to appropriate whatever funds may be required to assure that the native interest is adequately represented throughout the land claim negotiations in Washington. Whatever the cost, it will be but a fraction of the dividends paid by a just, reasonable and early settlement that satisfies all concerned.

I want to say a word, too, about the importance of the Alaska Federation of Natives to this settlement. The AFN has proved a responsible, worthy spokesman for the Alaska native. It has earned its place of leadership. And I think we should all recognize the importance of a single native voice representing the interests of the native. Many voices would only confuse the congress and give opponents fuel for their opposition. We must work to strengthen the statewide native organization. And from that strength we will achieve unity and ultimate success. . . .