

AFN STUDIES NEW LAND BILL

North Slope Townships, Land Reserves, Mineral Rights Concern Group

By LAEL MORGAN
Staff Writer

BETHEL—No formal assessment of the House Interior Committee's land claims bill came from the meeting of the Alaska Federation of Natives Board this week but good groundwork was laid.

"There is quite a bit of concern on land reserve areas and a lot of technical stuff that, even after analysis, we feel we have to do some work on. It will probably take about two weeks," explained Don Wright, president of the organization.

The Bethel meeting was devoted mainly to explanation and analysis of the new legislation which was released by the House House Affairs Subcommittee last week after a long fight.

The new legislation was read in full and, through an interpreter, comparisons were made with the original bill submitted by AFN.

Also on the agenda was a report by the Arctic Slope Native Assn. which is considering additional protection of their land by incorporation under the Indian Reorganization Act to become a quasi-autonomous nation under the federal government.

Scores of Kuskokwim villagers crowded to attend the meeting held in the VFW Hall which was, ironically, decorated with palmy scenes from a tropical jungle.

Through attorney Ken Bass and interpreter Phillip Guy they learned the new bill would give them a total of \$480 million in cash assets which would equal approximately \$8,000 per Native (based on an estimated 60,000 Natives.)

It was not money but land and loopholes that interested them however.

"Barrow is entitled to at least seven townships but because of the bill's construction, only four townships can be selected because of the petroleum reserve," Bass said. "About 10 villages in the Clarence

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Rhodes Wildlife Refuge have this problem and there's no provision for in lieu land.

"No village will be required to move. That's something we were unable to get in the Administration bill, and it's an important concession," he added.

But there are technical loopholes that must be ironed out.

"Point Hope can't get enough land for the three townships to which it's entitled because it's on a spit. That's a technical oversight in the bill...I don't think it was done on purpose I think it can be corrected.

"Hooper Bay can get only two townships because of its location. But maybe they could go into the wildlife reserve, or along the coast."

The question was raised of Chevak which is blanketed by federal lands.

"Chevak will select and get five townships but only surface title under the present conditions of the bill," Bass said. But he held out hope that there might yet be a chance for mineral rights.

"Nunivak Island is in almost the same position as Chevak under three federal land titles. They are entitled to five townships but because of the location they can get only four with no mineral rights. Individual Natives not living in Mekoryuk (the main village on the island) can get title to 160 acres. They will have full rights. That may be an oversight but we're not going to mention it."

Kuskokwim villagers worried that they would only be allowed subsistence hunting and fishing on townsites but Bass said, "If they can hunt and fish lawfully now (on game preserves) they can continue to do so."

For additional protection of all Native land rights, formation of regional corporations under the IRA was suggested by Charlie Edwardson, executive director of the Arctic Slope Native Assn.

There had been some question as to whether a region would be allowed to form such a corporation but permission has just come through to do so, he reported. The Arctic Slope will vote on it Aug. 26, and Edwardson predicts there is good

chance of passage.

"There are substantial benefits under federal authority. A state chartered corporation can be altered by the State Legislature, depending on the feelings of a state which I think is very hostile to Native inhabitants.

"Being a regular government entity under federal law, to the Arctic Slope Natives, looks more beautiful than eventually being left in the year 2,000 when they take your fee title away."

The IRA corporation would be eligible for funds at the cost of other tax payers, he pointed out. It would also avoid the 40-60 per cent corporate tax of the state.

"If the whiteman enables me three choices I am going to choose all three of them. I'm not going to bind my people to making one bad decision. I'm going to bind them for all three of them!

"I just want to keep you posted and I don't want to shove it down your throat," he concluded with a grin. But both Wright and Harry Carter, executive director of AFN, said Edwardson's logic is sound and the plan would be considered as protection for other regions of the state.

Wright added that Bethel was a good location for the claims meeting.

"Bethel is one of the most difficult areas because of the linguistic barrier. We had people come in from many villages that were not very familiar with what had happened (the land claims legislation). Now they want to go back and talk to their villages."

He admitted there had been opposition to his policy of holding meetings in rural areas.

"But after this meeting there was agreement with it, after seeing the interest and the expense individuals went to to come from the villages to meet with us."

He said the Tlingit-Haidas had just guaranteed a loan to carry AFN through a year's operation and that travel money for additional bush meetings is included.

The next site will be Ft. Yukon, then Kotzebue, Kodiak and Sitka.