

Native Leaders React to Hickel Firing

Reactions from some prominent Native leaders in Alaska to the firing by President Nixon of Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel ranged from dismay to hopeful optimism that present Interior policies may be continued on a number of issues vital to Alaskan Natives.

First and foremost in the concerns of most Alaskan Natives was the effect Hickel's firing would have on the land freeze, which is scheduled to end at the end of this year.

"Our major concern is the effect of Hickel's firing on our hope for having the land freeze extended administratively," commented John Borbridge, president of the Central Council of

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the Tlingit-Haida.

Other Native leaders echoed this concern.

"It really doesn't matter who extends the land freeze," said Alaska Federation of Natives executive director Eben Hopson. "If there is no extension, we're in trouble. The major impact would be if the land freeze is not extended. This would take pressure off Congress and off the state."

"I think we're losing the only arm we have in Washington on Native Land claims," commented Ralph Perdue of the Fairbanks Native Association. "He (Hickel) is the only one who brought the Native Land Claims to life as Governor and as Secretary. He was the only man you could call day or night, without going through the red tape usually necessary to reach a cabinet member."

Mr. Perdue also feared what the effect of the firing might be on the changes Hickel sponsored in the BIA, changes which will bring it closer to the people.

Other Native leaders feel a new man might extend the land freeze without modification.

Joe Upicksoun of Barrow, president of the Arctic Slope Native Association, had mixed emotions on the firing.

"We're not concerned up here yet," he said, "because we had some idea Wally Hickel would attempt to legislate modification of the land freeze—which we weren't too happy about."

"As Alaskans, we're sorry that this one time we had an Alaskan aware of the problems of Native Alaskans in office, he got fired. Let's hope the new Secretary of the Interior will have more depth of understanding as far as Alaskan Natives are concerned," he said.

The major task of educating the new Secretary of the Interior," said John Borbridge on what the Tlingit-Haida planned to do. "Mr. Morton brings some fine credentials and will serve admirably as Secretary. The first thing we need in Alaska is to educate him on the vital priority issues, so they will continue without major changes in policy. These issues are, of course, land claims, the land freeze, and the turnover of functions to the Alaskan Native organizations."