

Land Freeze Extension Remains Big Question

Late Bulletin

Shortly before the paper deadline, Sen. Henry M. Jackson, D-Wash., announced that the land freeze in Alaska has been extended for six months.

The order originated from the White House and reportedly with the concurrence of the Interior Secretary designate Rogers Morton.

By TOM RICHARDS, JR.

WASHINGTON — With the firing of Interior Secretary Walter Hickel last week, the big question which remains is whether his expected extension of the

land freeze in Alaska will be carried out by acting Interior Secretary George Russell.

Shortly before Hickel's firing it was thought in Washington that, in an effort to assist the Congress in a speedy legislative settlement of the Alaska Native land claims and in response to requests by the Natives and interested members of Congress, an announcement of a freeze extension was close at hand.

The time draws to a close when the land freeze can be extended, as it is scheduled to come to an end at the end of this year.

Such key personalities in Indian Affairs as Senator Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), chairman of

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the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee recommended an extension of the current land freeze.

Being the very probable fact of seeing no claims legislation during this congress, due mostly to the absence of House Interior Committee Chairman Wayne Aspinall (D-Colo.) from the lame duck session, the Alaska Federation of Natives has lobbied for the extension (without modification) of the current freeze.

Secretary Hickel was in favor of a modification of the land freeze, which would file "hardship" cases, including a number of homesteads.

Many Native leaders began to feel their settlement chances might benefit by extension of the freeze and an easing off on requests for congressional action during the lame duck session where an unhappy Congress is trying desperately to accomplish needed legislation.

Native leaders feel that members of the House Interior Committee should not be placed under any pressure to move legislation during the lame duck session. They reason that House members are inclined to consider a minimal amount of legislation during the session and that over lobbying may jeopardize favorable sentiment for action early during the next congress.

Leaders who were in Washington last week included AFN President Don Wright, Executive Director Eben Hopson, State Senator-elect Willie Hensley and Arctic Slope Executive Director Charles Edwardson.

Mr. Hopson flew back to Anchorage before Thanksgiving and will remain there to attend an AFN board meeting on December 5.

Another factor in favor of a fresh start on claims legislation during the next congress is the sentiment among House Interior Committee members for agreeing to the full amount of land requested by Natives.

The committee has been polled on the subject of granting a large land base to Natives at least twice during the past two months.

The results show that the committee could approve the 40 million acre figure, although they may be hesitant to recommend simple fee title to Natives on very much of that acreage.

The AFN is encouraged by this evidence of support and is not greatly discouraged by the lack of action in the House.

Don Wright, who says that his primary objective for being in Washington is to familiarize himself with the claims effort here. As he becomes accustomed to the responsibilities of his new post, Eben Hopson is relied on heavily for much of the daily operation of the AFN.

Hopson, while in Washington, discussed the impact of what he thought had become a "third party" in the claims effort.

He warned that, although oil and pipeline interests may provide impetus for expedient action, their influence could result in legislation that would concentrate on creating a pipeline corridor to the detriment of a fair land claims settlement.

Hopson and Hensley did indicate that a major break for the Native position came about with the election of former Governor Egan.

Hensley said that, with the aid of the Egan administration, claims legislation could be passed

by March of next year.

"The new administration is going to change the whole atmosphere in Washington. The new Governor's position is that he agrees the state should participate in the settlement," Hopson added.

In preparing for a sustained effort in Washington, the leaders met with AFN attorney Ramsey Clark last week.

During the strategy sessions, they noted that a new element has arisen with a push by pipeline interests to get a legislative freeze through the House.

A legislative freeze could allow land for a pipeline corridor to which all aboriginal title would be extinguished.

Should the threat begin to materialize, the AFN will have to fight it, they state.

The AFN delegation is preparing to return to Alaska for a scheduled board meeting on December 5.

Armed with a land freeze extension from the acting Secretary and commitments from the Egan administration, the AFN would be able to draw plans for a final and successful drive for favorable land claims legislation early during the next congress.

The end of the land freeze would leave the entire issue in doubt, eliminating the AFN's foothold in Congress and postponing favorable action on land claims indefinitely.