

CIRI tribal status needs close examination, moral leadership

If people and common sense are put ahead of political posturing, the request by Cook Inlet Region Inc. to be recognized as a tribal entity should be fairly simple to resolve. It will require all involved to exercise rhetorical self-control, reason and altruism. It will necessitate putting aside fear as the ultimate determinant of policy.

Let's look at the players:

CIRI- We feel that as long as CIRI has valid resolution from tribes in the Cook Inlet area to deliver Alaska Native programs and services, it should be able to perform this role without jumping through bureaucratic hoops. Congressional recognition of CIRI as a tribal entity is one way to accomplish this; there may be others. CIRI shouldn't care how it's done, as long as it gets done.

Cook Inlet Tribes- If the villages of Cook Inlet have a problem with the CIRI request, so do we. Along with this view, we offer one.

Critical disclaimer: that the village objections are made for the right reasons. If they were to use the tribal issue as a way to vent the frustrations about other matters such as executive compensation or CIRI's resource development policy, that would cloud the issue to the detriment of tribal members. However, three of the villages have a lawsuit pending which deals with issues of tribal jurisdiction in the region which predates the CIRI request.

While it may not be CIRI's intent to quash the suit by seeking congressional recognition, that might well be the outcome. Therefore, if a congressional measure is the best way to meet CIRI'S needs, it should be put off until the suit is resolved or it should contain a sunset provision. Cook Inlet Tribes deserve their day in court.

Federal Government- If the Interior Department really wanted to help advance tribal status, it could have thrown its considerable weight behind the Alaska Native positions in several major, pending tribal-rights lawsuits. Further, its hand-wringing expressions of concerns about the CIRI proposal appear cynical since its own Bureau of Indian Affairs, is the agency that has made life difficult for CIRI. If the rationale has been to strengthen Cook Inlet Tribes, then we have a case of good motive, bad judgement and lousy tactics.

Sen. Ted Stevens- We've disagreed with him a number of times on his positions and his political manipulations. We don't argue that he has been a sincere ally on

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some issues, but he has used the Alaska Native community to his own ends as well. We remain deeply disturbed by the pressure he applied to the Alaska Federation of Natives to endorse drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge at the expense of some of their own.

In the present case, Stevens has showed restraint, which we hope he will continue to do. If the Native community can't reach consensus on this matter, he should pull the measure from the hopper, at least for the time being.

AFN- To its great credit, AFN has offered itself as a mediator on this issue. We hope that AFN will remain neutral on the CIRI proposal, unlike the ANWR debate, until there is unity among its members.

We also urge that the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council be invited to co-mediate.

In fact, we call on all extra-tribal interests, the federal government and the congressional delegation in particular, to lend their efforts towards mediation, as well.

The forgotten people in this heated discussion may be Alaska Natives living in Anchorage who would not likely receive services from Cook Inlet Tribes if the villages ultimately pulled their resolutions and funding away from CIRI.

Any discussion of CIRI's request must consider their needs. This fact alone argues against fast-tracking the measure. CIRI has to exercise wisdom and moral leadership in wielding its considerable power.