



Gruening Asks Early Hearings in Alaska

"Future" legislation by Congress, called for in 1884, got underway last Friday as Senator Ernest Gruening introduced the Alaska Native Land Claims bill.

The bill, drafted by Department of the Interior Undersecretary Charles Luce, has been referred to the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, and to its subcommittee on Indian Affairs.

Gruening requested that hearings be scheduled in Alaska as soon as possible so that citizens could give their views on the bill.

Major provisions of the bill are:

1. Each native community

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receives its village site, plus up to 50,000 acres of land that contributes significantly to the livelihood of the people. These lands will be held in trust for 25 years.

2. Hunting and fishing rights exclusive or non-exclusive will be given for wider areas, subject to state game and fish laws. These rights will be in effect for 25 years.

3. Monetary compensation for land will be based on value at time of the purchase from Russia in March, 1867.

"This is a complicated bill," Senator Gruening said, "and will require careful

study and analysis before specific comments on many of its provisions will be appropriate."

A letter from Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall accompanied the bill. He pointed out that "in the absence of congressional recognition of aboriginal native title...the natives have no ownership interest in the land." Their right of occupation and use may be terminated by the U.S. at any time without compensation.

Congress has the choice of granting or taking away title, Udall said. He reported that in other states, Congress had confirmed some titles to land and done away with others.

As soon as the bill passes, the Secretary can lift the land freeze. He can withdraw lands subject to grant by the natives. Other lands can be selected by the state, regardless of native use and occupancy claims.