

# Greatest Claims Settlement Yet Cash Is Mighty Low

By LAEL MORGAN

Alaskan Eskimos and Indians just made the biggest land claims settlement in history but you can't prove it by the cash on hand.

"I'll tell you there'll probably be no cash flow to anybody in the next two years," Harry Carter, executive director of the Alaska Federation of Natives, explained over the phone to an Eskimo stranded in Portland, Oregon. "I'll try and see if anyone can help you . . . No, jobs are kind of scarce up here right now."

"We've got lots of problems," Carter admits. "But that's nothing new. We understand deficit spending. We're used to it. We've been doing it for five years."

Technically there's no money available to explore incorporation of the 12 regions required under the Congressional land claims settlement. Sen. Mike Gravel has suggested tapping President Nixon's contingency fund. Sen. Ted Stevens thinks the state might offer a loan.

Governmental agencies like the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Office of Economic Opportunity are being buttonholed for travel funds to get representatives from the 12 regions together.

Despite empty pockets, however, the Native standing as a credit risk looks good.

"We will be one of the 20 largest business corporations in the country," Carter predicts. "Collectively, if we operate as a

business we can't fail. Our resources in terms of Indian ownership are tremendous. Money talks. We have control of tremendous resources."

"Many of our people don't understand what the land claims settlement really is. They don't have the feeling of its economic impact on the whole state. They don't have the feeling for their own political muscle," echoes Don Wright, president of AFN.

"We're on the threshold of a mass education era on exactly who they are now and that they have a land base and a money base and what a strong clout they have."

"The first thing after the people are informed that they have true equal standing, we have to educate the rest of the state to the same thing."

The farsighted have already noticed. Elmer Rasmuson, head of the National Bank of Alaska, stands by the statement he made at the first statewide land claims hearing in 1968:

"First there would be the material wealth which would be utilized in Alaska. The natives are permanent residents of Alaska. The settlement needs to be generous, because we all know that it is the surplus over our subsistence that is saved and reinvested."

"Thus the native population becomes a strong contributory force to our economy which generates new business, broadens our tax base and creates additional investments."

"It can only be a plus factor," he added last week in Anchorage.

"By getting the land into private hands there's got to be advantages."

"I think it's one of the greatest things to happen, not only for the Natives but for the state," reasons A.F. "Buddy" Morel who is in charge of Native Affairs at Alyeska Pipeline. "No one could do anything. No one knew who owned what. This is going to inject money and release land which should have real impact on the economy."

"Let's give the Natives the whole state. In three weeks we can take it away from them. That's what they were saying in Anchorage," recalls Donald Simasko, independent oil operator. "But they're wrong. I've never seen a more competent lobby than the Natives."

He hopes the regions will acquire good outside help before attempting to lease their lands and hopes they'll be more reasonable to deal with then state and federal government.

"If they want to take the risk they may decide to form their own oil companies," he speculated, noting the climate for outside oil investment is currently chilly.

As for Native ability to handle their own business, Joe Smith, who manages the fed-

erally funded Community Economic Development Corp., reports it is apt.

"We have 30 enterprises and all are managed by Natives. Ninety per cent of these showed up in the black at the year's end statement," he said. "We're extremely proud of that. The small business failure rate nationally is 80% and with the added risks of operating in rural Alaska, ours should be 95%."

Some of the CEDC operations are turning a profit and many that break even benefit the community. Through one CEDC fishing coop, for example, the price paid native fishermen has risen from five cents to 15 cents per fish.

"The people in rural Alaska

may lack technical expertise like business administrators and accountants but they can buy these services. With proper help they can make as wise investments as any other laymen," Smith maintains.

The capital for Native investment is at least two years off under the terms of the settlement, however, and in the mean time it's the same old "rough sledding."

Only this morning a man approached the Tundra Times secretary at the post office and asked if he could "borrow 30 cents for a cup of coffee until the claims money came through."

She was sympathetic but unfortunately she didn't have any money either.

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