

NCAI to Push for Passage of Native Land Claims Bill

The National Congress of American Indians is slated to push for passage of the Alaska Federation of Natives land claims bill as a result of a resolution passed recently at the organization's 27th annual convention.

Meeting in Anchorage, the approximately 500 delegates represented about 100 tribes from all over the nation adopted a resolution in support of the original land claims position of the AFN.

Thus, according to Don Wright, area vice-president of the NCAI, the nationwide organization will lobby for the AFN bill when Congress reconvenes after the November elections. That bill calls for 40 million acres of land, \$500 million in cash and a 2 per cent overriding royalty.

The delegates also passed a resolution asking Secretary of the Interior Walter Hickel to extend the federal land freeze in Alaska without modification.

The action came in spite of assurances from the Secretary

earlier at the convention that he will protect the land around the native villages.

Addressing the delegates Wednesday, Hickel said that the Interior Department will probably lift the land freeze partially when it expires Dec. 31.

In that event, the Secretary has said that a complete freeze would be maintained on about 40 million acres surrounding native villages. This action would be designed to protect the 10 million acres that the Interior Department feels the natives are entitled to.

Requesting a 40 million acre settlement, the AFN has opposed any lifting of the freeze until the native land claims issue is resolved.

The NCAI stood behind its member organization and asked that Hickel pledge to continue the two-year-old freeze. The freeze was ordered unofficially in 1966 and officially in 1968 to protect native claims. It placed unreserved public lands in a status quo position pending settlement of the native land claims.

Native leaders spoke out forcefully on the land claims question in a convention session Thursday afternoon. All such sessions were held in the Anchorage Westward.

President of the Tlingit and Haidas, John Borbridge, Jr. told the delegates that the natives are opposed to a land freeze modification because it is a compromise.

"We have already given up 17 million acres of the choicest land in Alaska to the State."

And out of 340 million acres claimed by natives, "we are asking for only 40 million," he added.

"We are not going to be given land because this is our land."

In a moving speech, Borbridge concluded, "We can't ask the NCAI to fight any harder than we are willing to fight and be heard."

The crowd gave the Alaskan native leader a standing ovation.

Following Borbridge, Al Ketzler, president of the Tanana Chiefs, called upon the NCAI to help the Alaskan natives maintain the land freeze and secure passage of the AFN land claims bill.

"We are asking for only 11 per cent of the land for about 23 per cent of the population," he stressed. "We are not asking for all that land and all that money. It is they who are asking for all that land."

"Through the years, WE have compromised," he stressed.

Also, Chief of the Tyonek Indians, Fred Bismark briefly related how his people won a court fight for their land and later leased that land to oil companies for almost \$13 million.

He strongly urged, "Let's fight for 100 million acres of land, not 40 million. Never give up. Never say you can't do it. How do you know you can't do it? You're going to have to work

for the rest of your life and it might not benefit you, but it will benefit your children and grandchildren."

"I don't care if all Indians become millionaires. They will get hungry for wild game and fish and you will need land to go in and get it."

The crowd applauded when Bismark added that he does not consider the Senate bill a bill. "I consider it a welfare bill. We

don't want a welfare bill. We want a settlement bill," he said.

Other speakers on the panel also stressed the importance of the Alaska natives obtaining as much land as possible and obtaining full title to that land.

They were Frank Degnan, sergeant-at-arms of the AFN; Genevieve Hooper, Secretary of the Yakima Tribe in Washington state, and James Hovis, Yakima attorney.

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