

For Immediate Release – April 23, 2009



Alaska Delegation Introduces Land Bill Vital to Economy, Environment and History of SE

Legislation protects Native sacred sites, enhances environmental protection, creates sustainable timber activity and opportunity for alternative forms of economic development

Washington, D.C.—Today Alaska Senators Lisa Murkowski and Mark Begich and Congressman Don Young introduced legislation in the U.S. Congress to address cultural and economic needs and enhance environmental protection in Southeast Alaska communities by returning long-promised productive and sacred lands to Sealaska, the Corporation representing Southeast Alaska Natives.

The bills have bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate.

“We are grateful to Senator Murkowski, Senator Begich and Congressman Young for their commitment to the people of Southeast Alaska,” said Rosita Worl, vice chair of Sealaska’s board of directors and the president of Sealaska Heritage Institute.

“This bill recognizes Native people’s historic relationship with our land for our livelihoods and our culture. And it recognizes the need for our people and communities to have lands that protect Southeast economies, the environment and Native culture.”

Lands for a sustainable economy in Southeast

The 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act guaranteed the return of 44 million acres of land to Alaska Natives and authorized the creation of Regional, Urban and Village Corporations. Alaska Natives of the Southeast region were entitled to up to 375,000 acres, or less than 1 percent of all ANCSA acreage, by far the smallest allotment of land to a Native corporation.

More than 37 years later, only 290,000 acres have been conveyed to Sealaska. Under current law, Sealaska is forced to choose its remaining 85,000 acres from a pool of 327,000 acres of “withdrawal” lands designated by the federal government.

Much of the land available for selection is in inventoried roadless areas, intact watersheds, municipal watersheds, and high value fish and wildlife habitat important for subsistence resources and to commercial fisheries. Sealaska believes that these lands are better suited for public ownership.

The Southeast Alaska Native Land Entitlement Finalization Act, or *Haa Aaní* (a Tlingit phrase representing Native peoples’ relationship to the land), introduced today seeks to address cultural, economic and environmental needs of the Southeast Alaska community by allowing Sealaska to select a number of parcels of Native ancestral homelands.

Chris McNeil, Jr., Sealaska's president and CEO, noted that the bill is a product of the people and communities of Southeast Alaska. "The Alaska delegation and Sealaska created a bill that honors the intent of ANCSA and reflects the priorities and concerns of the people of Southeast Alaska," he said.

"We have held more than 150 meetings with interest groups and communities to craft legislation that will address the needs of our people and all Southeast communities, stakeholders and the environment."

A win for the environment and the public

Some 85 percent of Sealaska's current congressionally mandated withdrawal lands are inventoried roadless areas home to vast swaths of old-growth forests that provide habitat for fish, birds, deer, wolves and bears.

Under the *Haa Aaní* legislation, Sealaska would release its rights to these lands to the public and would instead take ownership of up to 85,000 acres of land with great cultural and historic values, and create opportunities for sustainable economies. Approximately 8,600 acres would be reserved for sacred sites and "Native Futures" sites on which no commercial harvest or mineral development will occur. Much of the remainder would be used to create opportunities for sustainable economies. Sealaska will provide unprecedented public access to all economic development lands and migration routes as identified by the legislation.

More than 70 percent of the remaining acres identified in the bill are roaded and will provide suitable timber to fulfill Sealaska's goal of a sustainable forestry economy critical to many small communities in Southeast. Overall, Sealaska would receive approximately 39,000 fewer acres of old growth available for timber development than it would if it selected all its remaining lands from within the ANCSA prescribed withdrawals. The net effect will enhance conservation of high value areas and help create sustainable economies.

Sealaska maintains a state-of-the-art forest research and monitoring program in partnership with the University of Washington and Oregon State University. Through this work, Sealaska is constantly developing and improving upon best practices for forest management to ensure the health of its forests and the fish, wildlife and people that depend on them.

Preserving sacred sites

In addition to economic development lands, the legislation would allow Sealaska to gain ownership of many cultural, historical and recreational sites important to the preservation of Native history and culture, and to advance Native cultural programs. This is the only means through which Natives may gain control of these sacred places.

Specifically, the legislation reserves 3,600 acres of the final entitlement for more than 200 sites with cultural, archaeological, and historic significance. These will be managed to respect the ancestral traditions through cooperative agreements between the local tribes and Sealaska. Activities inconsistent with ancestral traditions, such as commercial uses, logging or mining would be prohibited.

Creating New Enterprises

Further, the legislation reserves 46 Native Futures sites, totaling 5,000 acres, that offer unique cultural, historical and wilderness experiences, as well as renewable energy opportunities.

Sealaska will explore partnerships with local tribes, communities, local businesses and residents to enhance indigenous and wilderness experiences, and share local character and knowledge to guests.

“This legislation is long overdue,” said Marge Young, a Sealaska board member and longtime business owner in Craig. “There is an economic and energy crisis contributing to outmigration from our villages, and education infrastructure is just one of the areas in jeopardy. This bill is exactly what we need to maintain Southeast as a beautiful and supportive place to live and raise a family.”

“We have fought so long for the return of productive, meaningful land for our people,” said Byron Mallott, a Sealaska board member instrumental in helping craft ANCSA.

“It is important for all of us who live in the Tongass, as well as those who cherish it from afar, to recognize that the Native people of the Tongass are committed to preserving it as the land of our ancestors and the foundation of our spirituality, values and beliefs. The Tongass is our home. We have nowhere else to go and wish for no other place.

“This legislation is the final piece of the promise of ANCSA.”

The legislation is likely to be considered later this year by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, chaired by Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico and by the House Natural Resources Committee, chaired by Rep. Nick Rahall of West Virginia.

Contact:

Todd P. Antioquia

Director of Corporate Communications

907.586.9295 direct

907.723.4129 cell

todd.antioquia@sealaska.com

Find Sealaska online: www.sealaska.com