

## **Alaska: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow**

### **Alaska and the Federal Government: A Unique Relationship**

A major issue in Alaska today is the state's relationship with the federal government. Sixty percent of Alaska's land is owned by the federal government. Under the Statehood Act the state received title to most of the land with potential for economic development. However, at this time, there are also some oil and mineral prospects on federal land that may add a major boost to the Alaska economy. The most important of these are possible oil deposits in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and in National Petroleum Reserve – Alaska (NPR-A). These areas lie respectively east and west of the great Prudhoe Bay oil fields.

Understanding how the federal government came to own Alaska's land – by purchase from the Russians in 1867 – and how new states are created – by authority vested in the Congress by the U.S. Constitution – can help explain why it is up to the U.S. Congress to permit or prohibit oil exploration and production in Alaskan oil fields.

In the campaign for statehood, Alaskans sought to free Alaska from the power of federal government. Bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., who had never been to Alaska and did not understand the region's unique problems and challenges, made rules that Alaskans had to follow. Statehood freed Alaska from much federal control, but it did not make Alaska independent of the obligations that all states have. Nor did it eliminate many of the limitations on Alaska's development, such as the distance from markets in the Lower 48 and elsewhere and the high costs of transportation, labor and management.

Federal sovereignty is generally superior to state sovereignty. But states also have sovereignty, and one amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the 10th, gives to the states the powers that are not constitutionally reserved for the federal government. The courts, especially the U.S. Supreme Court, make final decisions about which areas and powers are reserved for the federal government, and which for the state. It is not surprising that the federal and state governments often go to the courts to solve disagreements over the limits of state sovereignty.

Historically, the federal government provided generous support to Alaska. The U.S. Army explored the territory in the late 19th century, for example, identifying and describing the region's natural resources, especially potential mineral deposits. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey mapped the Alaska coast and put navigation aids in place to provide safe sea-lanes. The U.S. Coast Guard continues to provide both search and rescue service along the Alaska coast, and law enforcement. When the Gold Rush era brought the first large

numbers of non-Natives to the territory at the turn of the 20th century, Congress paid for construction and operation of a telegraph connection to the Outside states to provide communication for settlers and for economic development. Soon afterward Congress paid for construction and operation (until 1982) of the Alaska Railroad to provide transportation of supplies from the coast to the interior. Congress spent millions of federal dollars to bring over two hundred families to the Matanuska Valley to try to stimulate agriculture in the territory. The federal government also paid for airfields around the territory for bush airplane operations and radio transmitters for airplane navigation and communication.

Both during the Gold Rush, and then during and since World War II, the U.S. military defended Alaska, and spent billions of dollars in the territory on various Cold War military defense installations, including upgraded air fields and bases, Navy navigation and submarine facilities, and communications and radar networks. After World War II, Congress spent millions of dollars on management of millions of acres of national forests, national parks, national fish and wildlife refuges and national monuments, such as Glacier Bay and Katmai. These areas bring hundreds of thousands of tourists to Alaska each year. Today, Alaska receives the highest per capita federal spending of any state in the union. One-third of Alaska's economic base is federal spending.

In addition to helping to guide the nation as members of the U.S. Congress Alaska's two U.S. Senators and one member of the U.S. House of Representatives must represent Alaskans' interests, and help develop federal policies that may affect the state. During the four years he was chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Alaska's senior Senator, Ted Stevens (who first went to the U.S. Senate in 1968), was able to identify and direct more federal funds to Alaska. While there will always be substantial federal money coming to Alaska, there will no doubt be some decrease in the level of funding when Senator Stevens no longer holds key positions. Much of the work ahead for the state's delegation in Congress involves explaining Alaska's circumstances to other members of Congress, and how any legislation may help or hurt Alaska.

Most Alaskans understand Alaska to be a unique place, with unique challenges. They resent continuing federal control over areas of Alaska and aspects of Alaskan lives. At the same time, they are proud Americans, support the U.S. military in Alaska and elsewhere, and are dependent on and appreciative of the many federal dollars that come to Alaska each year. It is likely that this complex understanding of Alaska's relationship with the federal government will continue into the foreseeable future.

