

Alaska: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

Probably no other legislation in the history of Alaska had a greater impact on the state than the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. ANCSA made Alaska Natives the largest private landholders in Alaska and empowered Alaska Natives as shareholders in regional and village economic development corporations. ANCSA also confirmed the equality and social, political and economic legitimacy of all Alaska Natives.

ANCSA contained provisions that led to the Alaska lands act of 1980. ANILCA (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act), set aside 104 million acres (28 percent of the total Alaska land base) in new conservation units, added to those, such as Mt. McKinley National Park (renamed Denali) that already existed.

In settling Alaska Native land claims, ANCSA helped to clear the way for Congress to authorize construction of the Alaska Pipeline. This then led to state taxation of oil production at Prudhoe Bay which provides 80 percent of the annual state budget. Investment of a portion (25 percent) of those taxes in the Alaska Permanent Fund generates the annual Permanent Fund Dividend. ANILCA also included a rural preference to guarantee access for rural Alaska residents to traditionally harvested subsistence resources.

Knowing the background of ANCSA helps us to understand the activity of the regional and village Native corporations today, and the role Alaska Natives have as shareholders in those corporations. It gives us insights into the challenges that corporations and Native shareholders face. For example, Natives born after the initial enrollment in ANCSA corporations are not automatically shareholders.

They can inherit stock shares, but that leaves them without a direct voice as corporation shareholders until they inherit shares. Corporations can create new shares by dividing existing ones, but only two corporations have elected to do that.

Another challenge is jobs. Many Alaska Native villages are not economically sustainable - there are simply not enough jobs in the village to provide incomes for most of the villagers. In most villages the school, fuel for generators to provide electricity, fuel for heat, fuel for ATVs and snow machines, water and sewage treatment plants and satellite dishes are subsidized by federal and state funds. But state funds have come under increasing pressure as declining production at Prudhoe Bay means smaller tax payments to the state.

What shall be done about those villages? Land is central to the Native way of life and way of thinking. Villagers have lived in the same area for thousands of years. Who should tell Natives whose identity and heritage are tied to a particular place that they have to move because there are no jobs in their

village? These are just some of the challenges Alaska Natives and all of the state's citizens must face.