

**Statement of
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Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Public Lands, Forests, & Mining
S. 1955, Alaska Native Veterans Land Allotment Equity Act
October 8, 2015**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 1955, the Alaska Native Veterans Land Allotment Equity Act. S. 1955 would make two amendments to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), in an effort to provide access to lands for individual Alaska Natives who have not received lands under the Alaska Native Allotment Act, the Alaska Native Vietnam Veterans Allotment Act, and ANCSA.

Background

The Alaska Native Allotment Act (1906 Act) was passed in May of 1906, and gave the Secretary of the Interior authority to convey up to 160 acres of non-mineral land to individual Alaska Natives. Over 10,000 Alaska Natives filed allotment applications.

The 1906 Allotment Act was repealed with the enactment of ANCSA in 1971, but ANCSA contained a savings provision for individual allotment claims then pending before the Department. In 1981, the vast majority of the still-pending applications were legislatively approved by Section 905 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). There remain pending, as of the date of this hearing, approximately 280 applications under the 1906 Act, most of which will require the State of Alaska to voluntarily reconvey title to the United States government before a conveyance can be made to the individual allotment claimant.

The BLM has prioritized the completion of individual allotments, and to date has completed final patent to approximately 98 percent (over 13,100 parcels) of individual Native allotments.

With respect to State land transfers, the BLM has identified a much faster, more accurate, and more cost-effective way to fulfill the promise of land conveyances called for in the Alaska Statehood Act. The BLM has proposed to use modern tools and to complete the remaining surveys and conveyances in a substantially shorter amount of time, while providing the State with higher quality data than was previously envisioned. This new approach could amount to substantial savings for the American taxpayer and will likely save the State both time and money after the land has been transferred. The BLM has presented the State of Alaska with the opportunity to jointly adopt this new approach through an update to a 1973 Memorandum of Understanding on surveying and monumenting and we are working with the State to determine a common path forward. It is our sincere hope to partner with the State of Alaska in this innovative new survey method to convey the remaining State lands out of Federal ownership and finally fulfill the promise of the Alaska Statehood Act.

The Alaska Native Vietnam Veterans Allotment Act (P.L.105-276) was enacted in 1998 to resolve problems with the repeal of the Allotment Act when some Alaska Native veterans of the Vietnam War missed opportunities to apply for allotments as a result of service in the U.S. armed forces immediately prior to 1971. The 1998 Act authorized the Department to reopen Native allotment applications for an 18-month period ending in January 2002, for certain Alaska Native Vietnam War-era veterans who may have been prevented from filing timely applications in 1971 because they were on active military duty at the time.

Congress tightly restricted the time period for which applications were reopened in order to minimize effects on other pending applications, private property interests, and other government programs. During this time period, the BLM received applications from 740 individuals claiming a total of 1,070 parcels. Of these, about 70 percent did not meet the terms of the Act and were rejected. Certificates for 243 allotments have been issued, and just eight parcels remain pending. The Vietnam-era Veterans transfer program is nearly completed.

S. 1955

Provisions in S. 1955 apply to two distinct groups of Alaska Natives seeking allotments of Federal land in Alaska under the authority of the 1906 Allotment Act. First, for a group of Alaska Natives whose applications: 1) were pending at the Department on the date of repeal for the 1906 Act; 2) were for allotments in the Tongass or Chugach National Forests; and 3) which claimed ancestral rather than personal use and occupancy, section 2 of S. 1955 would override the 1983 Ninth Circuit decision in *Shields v. United States*. The bill would reopen and legislatively approve any application for a Native allotment in lands withdrawn for the Tongass and Chugach National Forests that was pending at the Department on December 18, 1971, the date on which ANCSA repealed the 1906 Act.

The BLM expects that enactment of S. 1955 would require reopening and approval of over 1000 scattered new inholdings within the two National Forests. Implications of S. 1955 for lands already conveyed to Native Corporations under ANCSA are uncertain.

As to the second group of Alaska Natives seeking allotments, S. 1955 would allow any Alaska Native Vietnam War-era veteran who has not yet received a Native allotment to select up to 2 parcels of Federal land totaling no more than 160 acres, and an heir may apply for an allotment on behalf of the estate of a deceased veteran. Unlike the carefully defined restrictions of the 1998 Act, S. 1955 would allow Alaska Native veterans to select any vacant Federal land in the state of Alaska that is located outside of the TransAlaska Pipeline right-of-way, a unit of the National Park System, a National Preserve, or a National Monument. Thus, under S. 1955, available lands would include wildlife refuges, national forests, wilderness areas, acquired lands, national defense withdrawn lands, and lands selected by, or conveyed to, the State of Alaska or an Alaska Native Corporation.

The bill would authorize compensatory replacement selections from appropriate Federal land, as determined by the Secretary, as a replacement for land Native corporations may voluntarily reconvey for Native veteran allotments, and would require the Secretary to publish regulations within one year. A Native veteran (or heir) would have three years after the Secretary issues

final regulations to file an allotment application. Even though potential applicants may be submitted for up to four years, all conveyances under S. 1955 are required to be completed by December 31, 2020 – an unworkable deadline to complete reopening of applications, realty and survey activities, and final patenting.

As the Department has testified previously on legislation that would similarly reopen the Alaska land entitlement process, S. 1955 would disrupt precedent under existing law and complicate settled land use arrangements under ANCSA and ANILCA, undermining the goals of the Alaska Land Transfer Acceleration Act to finalize land entitlements under ANCSA, the Statehood Act, and existing applications for individual Alaska Natives and Native veterans. In this particular case, the bill would also create inequities between Alaska Native Vietnam veterans and Alaska Natives and award land to those who did not serve in the military prior to the repeal of the Allotment Act.

The BLM's Alaska Land Conveyance program is now in a late stage of implementation and the Department strongly supports the equitable and expeditious completion of the remaining entitlements under ANCSA and other applicable authorities. However, S. 1955 raises a number of concerns: S. 1955 would re-open numerous land claims which the Department has worked hard to resolve, would allow broad selection of any vacant Federal land in the state of Alaska with few exceptions, would give rise to new issues of fairness to other Alaska Natives and other Vietnam-era veterans, and would disrupt settled land use arrangements under existing statutes. While the Department opposes this version of the bill, we would be willing to work with the Committee on this issue to address our shared priority of equitable treatment of Alaska Natives through the Alaska Land Conveyance program.

Conclusion

The title recovery provisions in this bill that amend ANCSA would delay the Department's goal of completing the Alaska Land Transfer Program, which is in its final stages. The Department believes the completion of remaining entitlements under ANCSA and the Statehood Act is necessary to equitably resolve the remaining claims and fulfill an existing Congressional mandate.