

SENATOR PAUL TSONGAS

Letter to the Editor - Washington Star

Dear Editor:

Thank you for the Star's editorial support of balanced Alaska lands legislation. It is unfortunate that the complex issue of public wildlands in Alaska has been confused by two major fictions.

First, some interests claim that a balanced bill (like the Udall-Anderson bill which passed by a 360-to-65 landslide in the House of Representatives) would violate Alaska's rights as a state. In fact, the rights of Alaskans have been respected. Pending legislation involves federally-owned land owned by the American people since 1867, and which will continue to belong to all Americans. The State of Alaska has already received a land grant of 104 million acres -- larger than the land grants to all of the western states combines. The state quickly chose some of the richest oil and gas areas, as well as many areas rich in mineral and agricultural potential.

The Interior Department also is proceeding with the transfer of another 44 million acres granted to Alaskan Natives in settlement of their land claims. The federal government is working to speed these transfers of land once owned by the federal government. When transfer is complete, Alaskans will own approximately 150 million acres -- the majority of the State's most valuable, most developable land.

Second, some interests claim that balanced conservation legislation would "lock up" the energy resources in Alaska. In fact, there is only one area known to represent a significant conflict that involves potential energy resources -- the William O. Douglas Arctic Wildlife Range -- which encompasses only 5% of the lands in Alaska with high and favorable potential for oil and gas. It is uncertain whether there is oil beneath the Range in economically recoverable quantities. This public land contains the sensitive calving grounds for one of the largest free-roaming caribou herds left in North America. I oppose all-out exploration there now because the risk to the herd's survival -- and the survival of Native Alaskans who depend on the caribou for food -- is too great.

The Senate Energy Committee's bill would allow oil exploration in the Wildlife Range. This major weakness will be addressed by one of the strengthening amendments that I will offer. This amendment provides instead for private industry exploration and development in the nearby 22-million acre National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, which encompasses 60% of the lands in Alaska with high and favorable potential for oil and gas. The Committee's bill fails to open this highly promising area to leasing.

Under the strengthening amendments, 95% of all onshore lands with high or favorable hydrocarbon potential would be open to development-- according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Moreover, no Alaska lands bill would affect leasing of Alaska's offshore areas, which are estimated to have greater reserves of oil.

In general, the Senate Committee's bill disregards the fragile, pristine character and vastness of the public lands in Alaska. My amendments will specifically protect the valid economic rights of timber, mining, and energy industries, and provide for orderly oil and gas development in some of the most promising regions. The amended bill would incorporate many of the points urged by the Alaska legislature and Governor Hammond.

The amendments recognize the needs and aspirations of Alaska's residents, but they are balanced by the knowledge that these lands belong to all Americans.

Sincerely,

PAUL E. TSONGAS
United States Senator