

*SPEECH TO ARECA LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE, JUNEAU,
FEBRUARY 21, 2001 ...*

ARECA ... Alaska's Rural Electric Cooperative Association. There is a lot said in a few very short words ...

There also has been a lot said recently about the divide that separates rural and urban Alaskans. It seems, I think, that we hear far too much about what divides us -- and far too little about what unites us as Alaskans. So as we discuss ways to improve the quality of life in rural Alaska, let's keep in mind the importance of uniting Alaskans in a common goal of a better future for all of us and for our children.

In many ways, rural Alaska today could be compared to Clay County, Illinois of 1836. I'll be specific ... and take just about any Alaskan village and compare it to any typical small town of Clay County ... say, New Salem. Rural Alaska is truly the last frontier, and New Salem was on the first frontier. Folks who lived in New Salem were self-reliant, and lived a largely subsistence lifestyle. There was little transportation infrastructure. People lived hard lives -- but they also lived wonderful lives, raising families in a land that was rich with promise.

One resident of New Salem was very much like many Alaskans who've grown up far from the road system. When Abraham Lincoln moved to New Salem -- no more than a small, rural village -- it was the largest town he'd ever seen. He worked in the only store, and looked around to see what he could make of himself.

Abraham Lincoln was young and lacked sophisticated education. But he worked hard and he had vision. After saving a little money, he ran for the Illinois legislature. He didn't win the election, but he won the rural precincts and the small village of New Salem handily.

Abraham Lincoln understood rural folks, and he earned their respect and trust. He understood their primary natural resource was self-reliance and hard work -- and when you look at it, I don't think there was much difference between the folks who eventually sent Abe Lincoln to the state house in Springfield, and the folks who, today, live a subsistence lifestyle along Alaska's remote rivers and seacoasts.

Abraham Lincoln knew the solution to most problems lay with the ingenuity and hard work of his first constituents. Abraham Lincoln did not believe government was the first source of solutions to the many day-to-day difficulties that his rural supporters faced.

But Abraham Lincoln did see a role for government. ... One of his campaign planks was to use government funds to open the Sangamon River to barge traffic, and thereby transform New Salem into a river port and market center. I have no doubt that if Abraham Lincoln -- as a state legislator -- was somehow teleported to our time and place, he would be working closely with ARECA ... and AIDEA ... and Native Corporations ... to bring development projects to any of our state's rivers or sea ports.

Some people see rural Alaska as poor and troubled. I don't. Just as Abraham Lincoln saw New Salem as a place of hope and opportunity, I see rural Alaska as being full of tremendous potential.

ARECA is about powering rural Alaska. The main role of government, I believe, is to empower rural Alaska. Let's look at Adak ... Government has been able to facilitate an orderly and thoughtful transfer of its property into the hands of rural Alaskans. Person for person, Adak may have the best infrastructure of any community in Alaska. It has a state-of-the-art water, sewer and power system; a state of the art airport, and a few miles of some of the best-constructed streets in Alaska. But those assets do not make Adak a success -- it's the people who settle in, and work in, Adak who will make it a success.

True, infrastructure helps ...

This session I have been talking with folks from the Department of Transportation who are working hard to identify infrastructure needs in the Northwestern part of our state ... It's a project called the Northwest Transportation Plan. I think some good work is being done, and I encourage all of you to investigate this effort, because this plan truly sees real needs as it seeks out real solutions.

I am also aware of the good work being done by a Denali Commission study of rural energy development. I certainly hope this study will provide jobs to construction workers and engineers instead of "document storage" technicians.

We are sitting at a point in time with a great, great opportunity to create a real economy -- an economy that will see healthy, long-term growth. It's true, oil revenues will decline over the next decade. But we are on the verge of developing and exporting our rich reserves of natural gas -- gas which can fuel power generation right here at home. Rural electrification brought light to the heartland of the Lower 48 states in the 1930s -- and I can remember when I was nine years old and we got electricity for the first time Now, 70 years later, we could very well have an open door to resume the process in the heartland of Alaska.

As many of you well know, I have been working very hard to promote a railroad connection to the Lower 48 states. I think a railroad can be a tremendous asset to the process of moving gas to market. But I do not see rails heading into the sunset. I see a transportation - utility corridor that will carry gas, fiber optic communications and electricity out of Alaska -- and into Alaska.

We have a responsibility to our children, and their children and their children's children to make sure that when -- and I know that day will come -- - Alaska's natural resources will not only be needed but demanded in the global marketplace. And when that day comes we will need to be able to move those resources.

Yesterday I read an article that reported an environmentalist study of Alaska's economy. Their report concluded industries that were "environment-friendly" ... fishing, tour guiding, government oversight ... provided six times more jobs than did traditional resource development industries. Well, I disagree. All industries in Alaska depend on a clean environment. ... Every job in Alaska depends on a clean environment. Unless we wish to remove most of our state's population, a clean environment must be maintained just as we must see economic growth.

The entire process of opening the way for the Northern Intertie is a good example of how environmentalists concerns work to the detriment of our state and its people. Those behind the intertie followed all the rules of the game ... they dotted their "I"s and crossed their "T"s Still, the project has seen only delays, and its still being delayed. ... In Fairbanks, power needs are increasing, and a vital piece of infrastructure, it seems, remains hostage to well-meaning folks on a delay-and-destroy mission.

I would like to add a quick aside to this mention of the Intertie ... I am not unsympathetic to those who oppose the route selected -- because I know most genuinely believe better routes exist. And better routes may exist. But this is why we have a process. In no other nation on earth -- now or ever -- do citizens have a real say in the forming of such government decisions. A look at California's energy dilemma gives ample evidence of the consequences of delay after delay after delay ...

I have heard it said that Alaska does not have an economy. Rather it has a series of boom and bust cycles framed into pass-throughs from Federal government appropriations. If Alaska is to have a real, sustainable economy, it must have an infrastructure. It must have roads, railroads, fiber optic cables, microwave

towers, power-generators, ports, lit runways and ... most of all ... people with optimism ... People with education. ... People with a means to create wealth.

This won't come free. But we all have a responsibility to make it happen, so all Alaskans can enjoy a quality of life that comes with a family-wage paycheck.

Instead of looking to see where we, as Alaskans, are divided ... Let's look to see where we are united. Instead of looking to see where there are walls ... let's look to see where there are openings to the future.