



Alaska State Legislature Senate Majority News

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Interior Secretary Briefed on Alaska Land Issues Legislators highlight concerns unique to the State

(Juneau)— U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Gale Norton met with key House and Senate members today regarding various resource issues facing the State.

“We recognize, especially with Cam and Drue helping us with it, that a lot of things apply differently to you than to the Lower 48, and we need to try to take that into account,” Norton said. Former legislative aide Cam Toohey, now special assistant to the Secretary for Alaska, and former Senate President Drue Pearce, now senior advisor to the Secretary for Alaska affairs, accompanied Norton on her visit.

“I was pleased Secretary Norton took the time to meet with legislators to share information about our efforts this session to assert the State’s land rights,” said Senate President Gene Therriault. “The State Legislature and the administration are elevating our concerns over the state acquiring its submerged land entitlement of more than 60 million acres. We obviously need the cooperation of the Department of the Interior to expedite that process.”

Therriault told Norton the State supports the continued use of “Recordable Disclaimers of Interest” to document state title to non-contentious submerged lands, and asked about federal participation in a Joint Federal and State Navigable Waters Commission. The Senate has passed Senate Bill 295, a bill sponsored by Sen. Therriault to renew the commission. It was established in state law in 2002 to improve the water navigability determination process and recommend ways to clear title to the state’s submerged lands fairly and expeditiously, but was never activated because concurrent federal legislation did not pass.

“I am supportive of trying to get those issues resolved quickly and with as little rigmarole as possible,” Norton said. “We ought to be able to operate within that (recordable disclaimer) framework and get some decisions made.”

Therriault thanked Norton for revoking the Clinton administration’s mandatory Bureau of Land Management wilderness review policy.

“It’s nice to be able to say thank you for something that’s done,” Therriault said.

The State and the Department of Interior agree on issues such as the development of oil and gas reserves in Alaska, and Sen. Therriault asked Norton to identify areas where the state can provide more assistance.

“I’d just like to thank the Secretary for the tremendous difference that you’ve made by making the effort to listen to, and work with, the States,” said Sen. Scott Ogan (R-Mat-Su/Chugiak), chairman of the Senate Resources Committee.

Secretary Norton’s meeting with legislators was part of a 4-day tour of Alaska, including a signing ceremony to approve transfer of the Sentinel Island lighthouse to the Gastineau Channel Historical Society, opening ceremonies for a new Park Service maintenance facility in Glacier Bay, tour of the Icy Straits tourism project in Hoonah, and the federal employee annual awards luncheon in Anchorage.

Other topics included RS 2477 rights-of-way conflicts, leasing in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska and the federal government’s appeal of the Ninth Circuit Court decision regarding the allowance of commercial activities within wilderness areas.

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