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Feds have abused their compact with Alaska

One day in 1952, I read in the newspaper that an Alaska Statehood Bill had passed the U.S. House and was headed for sure passage in the Senate. President Harry Truman favored the bill and was ready to sign it, and Alaska's pro-statehood leaders were overjoyed.

But the bill was a disaster. Out of 365 million acres in Alaska, it allocated just 3 million to the new state. There was no way we could succeed with such a small land and resource base.

My wife Ermalee and I flew to the nation's capital. I was determined to see President Harry Truman I couldn't get in to see him, but by chance, I ran into him in a Washington hotel lobby and explained my case.

"Son," he said, "they aren't going to listen to you. Hell, they don't listen to anyone back here."

Later, Sen. Robert Taft, the leading Senate Republican, agreed to see me. Taft was an opponent of Alaska statehood because he didn't think we could pay our own way.

I argued that if we were granted enough land and resources we would succeed. He asked, "How many acres do you need?" I blurted out, "100 million!"

He agreed with my reasoning and led the successful fight to recommit that statehood bill. When we got home, Bob Atwood, the publisher of the Anchorage Times and chairman of the Alaska Statehood Commission, wrote a lengthy editorial headlined "Hickel's Heckles" accusing me of derailing statehood.



WALLY HICKEL

COMMENT

It is up to this generation to address these abuses of our statehood compact.

But from then on, every Alaska statehood bill included a land entitlement of at least 100 million acres. Six years later our final statehood bill passed both houses, granting us 103 million acres.

The act also granted us ownership of all unreserved inland, navigable waters and management of fish and game. And in the so-called 90/10 provision, it designated to our new state 90 percent of revenues from resources developed on federal lands in Alaska.

Congress required that the Alaska people agree to these terms, and the Alaska voters overwhelmingly adopted them in a special election on Aug. 26, 1958. Through this process our statehood compact was signed, sealed and approved by both Congress and the Alaskan people.

Fifty years ago yesterday, on Jan. 3, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Alaska statehood proclamation. As we celebrate that milestone, we mustn't forget the terms of our compact. Billions of dollars and future access to and from our remote communities and resources are at stake.

In the past 50 years, nearly all federal land in Alaska has been managed for recreation or wilderness, off limits to development. As a result, there are almost no resource revenues being generated from the 217 million acres of federal land in Alaska. This is the largest "taking" in the history of the United States.

Our rights of access have also been ignored. Going back to English common law, you can't sell or even give away land without access.

However, access across federal land in Alaska almost always will require a separate act of Congress because of the process established by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980.

This is especially important today because of the crisis in rural Alaska. Villagers are studying electrical inter-ties to reach remote areas. Many of these projects will require access across federal lands. If denied, many villages may find it difficult to survive.

It is up to this generation to address these abuses of our statehood compact.

In 1993, as governor, I sued the federal government for \$29 billion to compensate us for making the 90/10 provision meaningless. By the time that case went to trial I had left office, and it was halfheartedly pursued and poorly framed by those in charge.

One day Gov. Sarah Palin or a successor will recast that landmark lawsuit and take it to the U.S. Supreme Court and, if necessary, to the World Court. Because if the U.S. government fails to keep its promises to its own people, what can the rest of the world expect?

Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966-1968 and from 1990-1994 and as U.S. Secretary of the Interior from 1969-1970. Founder of the Institute of the North, he can be reached at wjhickel@gci.net.