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Statement by Senator Edmund S. Muskie on the Alaska Native Claims Legislation

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**STATEMENT BY SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
SUBMITTED TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR ON
THE ALASKA NATIVE CLAIMS LEGISLATION**

The one remaining question is the framework of settlement.
Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:
For nearly all of its history under the American flag, Alaska has never had the opportunities for growth and development shared by the original 48 states. Until Statehood, Alaska was little more than a ward of the Federal Government, continually forced to come to Washington for funds that were never sufficient. As a result, a great and potentially rich portion of the United States land mass was retarded in its growth. Those who lived in Alaska suffered that neglect and mounted a campaign that finally achieved Statehood and right of self-determination a short decade ago. But there is one last piece of unfinished business. We have not yet, as a nation, settled our debt or made our accommodation with the original Alaskans. There can be no controversy over whether the Alaska Native Land Claims are valid or whether an early settlement with the Natives is necessary. By prior action, the U.S. Senate and the Federal courts have recognized the obligation of the United States Government to settle accounts with those who possessed Alaska at the time of the Alaska Purchase. There can be no controversy over whether this century-old bill is due. It is long overdue. And now, a united Alaska, Native and non-Native alike, has petitioned its government to come to terms.

The one remaining question is the framework of settlement. I believe that settlement must be fair and just for lands already taken. But even more important, we must recognize that most Alaska Natives still utilize the land for subsistence purposes. They depend upon the fish and game resources. They require the same freedom of access to the land that they have historically enjoyed. More than a payment - however generous - for land taken, the settlement must guarantee that land will be preserved. To protect their "Take our land, take our life," cry of subsistence. It is to Mr. Chairman, this rallying cry of the Alaska Natives is much more than a slogan - it symbolizes the very wellspring of the Natives' existence. Perhaps more than any other native Americans, the Alaska Natives depend upon the fragile resources of a rugged and uncompromising land. Simple justice demands that this Congress recognize the legitimate claims of the Natives to preserve their way of life by acknowledging their legitimate land claims. I have joined in co-sponsorship of S. 835, a measure that reflects the collective judgment of the regional associations that comprise the Alaska Federation of Natives. This bill is the product of years of intensive effort of AFN representatives. It alone would give the Natives title to the 60 million acres requested by the AFN. This is itself a compromise among many conflicting ideas and claims.

It is not necessary for me to discuss in detail the provisions of S. 835 or to enumerate its differences with the other Alaska Native Claims bills pending before this Committee.. These measures all seek - in varying degrees - to compensate the Alaska Natives for lands that have been or will be taken.

I support S. 835 because I believe that its passage would best provide Alaska's Native people with a secure land base to develop their own economic and cultural opportunities and protect their traditional use of land as a source of subsistence. It is the only fair settlement before the Senate.

Mr. Chairman, the Alaska Natives are in a great period of transition. I believe that S. 835 best accommodates their traditions of the past and needs of the future.

The Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts of Alaska have been patient long enough -- the time for settlement is here. Settlement on a basis that permits the people of the North to live their own lives free at last from dependency upon hand-outs; free to make their own future, with tools that will permit them to build for themselves and their children the kind of opportunity all men seek and deserve.
