

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

news release

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VILLAGE HEARINGS SET IN ALASKA ON PROPOSED FINAL PUBLIC LAND WITHDRAWALS

Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus today announced the first steps in the process of deciding whether to withdraw permanently up to 57 million acres of federal land in Alaska primarily for wildlife refuges.

Secretary Andrus said the Fish and Wildlife Service has scheduled hearings in six Alaskan villages to get comments from rural Alaskans on the proposals.

The action, if it is taken, would be under authority of the Section 204(c) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). The areas are currently withdrawn for three years under emergency withdrawal orders issued by the Secretary November 16, 1978, after Congress failed to pass legislation putting these critical federal lands into conservation system units -- national parks, national wildlife refuges, wild and scenic rivers and national forests.

Subsequently, President Carter on December 1, 1978, declared 56 million acres (largely national park proposals) as National Monuments through his authority under the Antiquities Act. At the same time, he directed the Secretary to "proceed with necessary steps" for final withdrawals for the remaining areas. These steps involve providing Congress with documentation similar to that submitted in connection with the emergency withdrawals, and holding public hearings.

"The Administration still hopes that Congress will pass an acceptable Alaska lands bill this year, and we are working diligently toward that end," the Secretary said. "However, should Congress fail to act affirmatively, we must be prepared to take final action in order to protect the lands and the life they support -- both human life and animal life -- for this and future generations of Americans.

"It is vital that we hold the bush Alaska hearings soon, since villagers will be dispersing to conduct their traditional hunting and fishing activities shortly, and it is imperative that these people, who will be the most directly affected, have an opportunity to comment."

The village hearings in Alaska will be held April 24 in Kotzebue and Galena, April 25 in Kaktovik and Bethel and April 26 in Arctic Village and Dillingham. Basic documentation describing the proposals, including the report on the emergency withdrawals, will be available at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Offices in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Nome, Bethel, Juneau, Kenai and Kodiak.

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In addition, representatives of the Department of the Interior will make the documentation available during visits to the villages where the hearings will be held, substantially prior to the hearing date. Maps and site specific information will also be available. In addition, public service radio announcements are planned so that people in more outlying areas will be informed. All hearings will begin at 2:00 p.m. Specific locations will be available from the above cited sources.

Hearings will also be held in Anchorage and Fairbanks, as well as several cities in the lower 48. A later announcement will be made concerning these additional hearings.

Those interested in testifying are requested to notify the Area Director, Fish and Wildlife Service, 1011 East Tudor Road, Anchorage, Alaska 99503. Translators will be provided as necessary. Oral comments should be limited to 10 minutes, but written comments of any length are welcome. The comment period will be held open for 30 days following each hearing, and comments should be sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service Area Director at the above address.

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