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I have just returned from nearly a week in Alaska, and it has been a real eye-opener. Every time I go to Alaska I develop some new perspectives. This week I returned with an especially strong feeling of the urgent challenges which must be met in the near future.

Today, Alaska is America's last frontier. Its history, its distances and climate and natural resources, and the many human factors involved, all combine to make it a unique land indeed.

As a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, the oil discoveries and construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, and our growing need for natural resources, Alaska stands at the threshold of a new era.

Now, over 90 percent of Alaskan lands still are in Federal ownership. But, very shortly, the Natives will receive 40 million acres, the State will complete its selection of more than 103 million acres, the Congress will act on my recommendation to add more than 83 million acres to national forests, parks, refuges and wild and scenic rivers. Then we will begin to see intensive development. As a result, we can no longer wait for problems to solve themselves or can we afford to repeat all the mistakes made in the Lower 48.

It is time for a much higher degree of State, Federal and Native cooperation in Alaska in natural resource development, environmental control, and Native welfare. I intend to do all I can, to bring this about.

The vital need for this improved cooperation was underscored over and over again as I talked with people about studies of Native programs operated by the Federal Government, our administration of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and during conversations about development of mineral resources in Lower Cook Inlet and elsewhere.

The most dramatic evidence of change is visible along the route of the Trans-Alaska. Pipeline, as work crews and contractors try to beat the clock during this short summer season. The pace will pick up even more rapidly next yea I talked with our Authorized Officer for pipeline construction surveillance, General Andy Rollins, who reassured me that we will be able to meet our responsibilities for seeing that the job is done in accordance with the Interior Department stipulations.

Discussions with Native leaders about their land selections drove home the point again that we have no time to lose. As you know, the Native Claims Settlement Act requires the villages to complete their land selections by mid-December the regional corporations have one year longer to finish most of their selection process, but that will be a much bigger job because of all the mineral values involved.

Ownership and land-claim patterns are complex even now. An example is Lower Cook Inlet, where the submerged lands have substantial oil and gas potential, but are involved in a Federal-State ownership dispute which inevitably affects the Natives and the people of the lower 48. We are interested in an equitable interim agreement with the State so more development can proceed in orderly fashion.

Obviously, this cannot be done overnight. But long delays can simply make us more susceptible to foreign embargoes in the years ahead.

So this is no time for complacency about Alaska on anyone’s part. The biggest and toughest part of our job still lies ahead.

While in Alaska, I was asked more than once how I felt about the two river routes for a natural gas pipeline from Prudhoe Bay, one of which would cross Canada and the other one north to south through Alaska. I tried to convey the thought that I must remain absolutely impartial until enough facts are in to permit us to make a judgment. The Federal Power Commission is now working with us on a joint environmental impact study, so as to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort. The FPC has authority to certify pipelines; Interior would have to decide on right-of-way permits, because any such pipeline would -have to cross public lands which we manage. In addition, the President has asked me to give him my best thinking on which route would serve the best interests of the nation, over-all. It will take many months to sort this all out, but we will not let any grass grow beneath our feet meanwhile.

These meetings, and the things I saw, helped me to identify the issues affecting Alaska and the Nation, and to begin planning further action to resolve them. I took time once more to look over our proposals for national parks, forests, and wildlife refuges. Taking it all together, I think we've made a good beginning --one that will help Alaska grow with a balanced mix of resource development and preservation.

On the subject of energy, I hereby invite any of you who can come, to be present this noon in my ceremonial office at Interior when I sign an agreement with Great Britain for sharing technology on coal research, and exchanging our scientific personnel in this important field, during the next three years and hopefully longer.

Now I invite your questions.