Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Macfarlan -- 343-9431
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Indian tribal leaders throughout the Nation are now being kept advised of legislative developments in the Congress through new services instituted by direction of Robert L. Bennett, Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior.

Last year Bennett initiated procedures for detailed consultation with Indian tribal leaders in the development of major legislation to be sponsored by the Bureau, such as the recently proposed Indian Resources Development Act.

Regional meetings were held at which Indian leaders presented their positions; tentative proposed legislation was drafted, then further meetings were held with the Indians before final decisions were reached on the scope of the proposal to be submitted to Congress. These decisions included acceptance of many recommendations made by the Indians.

Following submission of a proposed bill, now identified as S. 1816 or H.R. 10560, Commissioner Bennett had copies of the legislation sent to all Indian tribal leaders.

Secretary of the Interior Stewart L. Udall described the bill as the most important legislation proposed for American Indians in many, many years, certainly the most important since the Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946.

While Bennett emphasized in his letter to the tribal leaders that the bill currently contains only proposals, because the provisions supported by the Department and the Bureau have not been approved by Congress, he said the legislation should be studied carefully so that the views of the Indians may be presented to the committees which will hold hearings. The Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs has scheduled a hearing July 11 to hear Interior Department witnesses. A schedule for general hearings has not been announced, but Bennett expressed hope they would be held this fall, or sooner.

Pointing out that "it is for Congress to decide whether they (the proposals) shall be accepted or revised or rejected," Bennett urged the tribal leaders into make your views known to Congress, to help the members of the committees in arriving at satisfactory recommendations.

In another new service, at Bennett's direction, the Bureau's Office of Congressional Relations is sending to the presiding officers of all governing bodies of Indian tribes and groups a report on the status of what it considers to be the major Indian legislative proposals that have been introduced in this session of Congress. The report is being sent weekly, except in those weeks in which no significant action occurs.

The report also goes to the Bureau's area directors and agency superintendents.

The presiding officers are urged to feel free- to contact their superintendents on any legislation of particular interest to them.