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Secretary of the Interior James Watt today awarded 23,000 timbered acres on Admiralty Island in southeast Alaska to the Sitka-based Shee-Atika Native Corporation in satisfaction of its selection rights under the 10-year-old Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

"This land transfer fulfills Interior Department obligations set forth by two separate Acts of Congress," Watt said. "The 1971 Native Claims Settlement Act gave this group of Tlingit Indians entitlement to 23,000 acres of land to be selected by their Native Corporation. Selection was frustrated by years of delay, as opponents filed repeated protests and appeals against Shee-Atika's original selection at Hood Bay on Admiralty Island.

"Eventually Shee-Atika was offered a different tract by Congress, this one on the northwest side of Admiralty Island, but the administrative obstacles continued. In passing the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, Congress specifically mandated the Secretary of the Interior to convey the selected lands to this corporation. We were ready to comply last August, but the Sierra Club and other opponents took their complaints to two administrative appeal boards. Finally, last week we exercised our jurisdiction at Shee-Atika's request to dismiss the appeals, and thereby cleared the matter for the action taken today."

Watt noted that Admiralty Island contains about 1 million acres, of which some 90 percent was formally designated wilderness by the 1980 law. The conveyance signed today implements Section 506 of that legislation.

"This decision exemplifies the kind of balance that must be struck between preservation and human needs," Watt said. "With the overwhelming majority of the island protected under law as wilderness, we also had to consider our obligation to the original Alaskans who live in that region and who depend upon its natural resources for a livelihood for themselves and their descendants."