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The Alaska - Hawaii connection (Part 4)

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The Hawaiian Connection

Senator Akaka doesn't receive much in the way of money from oil and gas interests, but Alaska's Republican politicians support his and Senator Inouye's Akaka Bill, which was reintroduced to the U.S. Senate on Feb. 25, 2003. Newly elected Republican Governor of Hawaii, Linda Lingle, helped kick off the lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill, and met with Attorney General John Ashcroft and Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton to discuss the bill. Lingle joined Hawaii's congressional chorus, insisting that this bill is the only hope Hawaiians have of establishing any type of governing entity that will protect their federal funding. In addition to this, when President Bush made a 12-hour visit to Hawaii in late-October, Governor Lingle made the matter of the federalization of Hawaiians the central issue she discussed with the President.

That Alaska's oil interests continue to lobby in Hawaii for support of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is odd, though, given that efforts to open that area to oil companies already have the support of Senators Inouye and Akaka.

"Why they continue to lobby is a good question," said Dan Ritzman, the Washington-based outreach director of Alaska Coalition, an organization devoted to

protecting Alaska's wild public lands. "I've always been happy that Arctic Power is willing to spend a lot of money on someone they have solidly to begin with, like Senator Akaka," said Ritzman. "It wouldn't be the first time Arctic Power has wasted their money. Last year they had a racist, stupid ad on billboards in Alaska that said, 'Protecting ANWR is Cheap,' and next to that was a drawing of an Arab man, and then it said, 'if you want to protect the Refuge you're helping Arabs.'"

In January 2002, Greener & Hook, a consulting firm whose clients include the National Republican Congressional Committee, placed an ad in the Honolulu Star Bulletin. It read: "Senator Akaka: Quyanapqak (Thank you very much) For Your Support." The ad then went on to say that drilling in a "tiny part of our homeland - ANWR" is synonymous with "self-determination," a catch-all term that is used three times in the ad, ending with, "Self-Determination Means Supporting the People Who Live in ANWR!" In the small print at the bottom of the page it said: "Paid for by the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation." But the invoice for payment to Greener & Hook shows that Arctic Power paid for half of the ad.

The timing of the Honolulu Star Bulletin ad coincided with nationwide campaigns both for and against Senators Murkowski and Stevens' attempts to amend the 2002 Energy Bill, which they lost several months later in a vote of 54 to 46.

A few months after the Honolulu ad appeared, Jade Danner wrote a letter to the editor of the Star Bulletin responding to a commentary the paper had published by Chuck Burrows, that criticized Senator Akaka's decision. She wrote:

"ANWR is in their [Inupiat] backyard, and they support limited development. Senator Akaka walked their land and talked with them. He voted with them, knowing it would bring the scorn of people like Charles Burrows. He made the right decision. He recognized them for the true environmentalists that they are - each and every decision made with the environment in mind. As a proponent of self-determination, Senator Akaka knows that it means more than supporting the decisions you personally agree with or that are easy to support. It means supporting local people, relying on local expertise and deferring to local decisions."

It's worth mentioning that repeated invitations to Senator Akaka by the Gwich'in to "walk their land," and talk with them have never been accepted, even though in 1995 he visited two Inupiat villages.

In November 2002, a debate on the floor at the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs Convention took place on the issue of whether or not that organization should support the Gwich'in people. The Hawaiian Civic Clubs have thousands of members throughout the United States and maintain some degree of political and cultural influence in the Hawaiian community at large. When the resolution was introduced, Robin Danner spoke out in opposition. She argued that what's happening in the Arctic is a dispute between two Native peoples that Hawaiians should stay out of. In her argument, Danner was condemning a resolution identical to one that was hotly debated at the National Congress of American Indians meeting, where it was decided that both the Inupiat and the Gwich'in would respect each others gathering and subsistence rights. (A compromise measure was reached at its San Diego convention whereby NCAI would oppose drilling on public lands and take a neutral position on drilling proposed for private tribal lands.)

"This isn't a quarrel between two Native peoples," said Chuck Burrows. The retired school teacher and president of Ahahui Malama I ka Lokahi, a cultural, environmentalist group in Hawaii that supports the Gwich'in, does not see the issue as a dispute between Natives. "Robin Danner argued that drilling in the ANWR is an issue of self-determination," he said. "But the Gwich'in and the Inupiat don't have bad feelings towards each other."

Whether or not this is a disagreement between two Native peoples continues to cloud the issue. "Uniformly, the Inupiat have fought to keep development out of the Arctic Ocean because of the Bowhead Whale, which is their cultural and subsistence food," said Ritzman. "It isn't any different for the Gwich'in who are fighting to protect the Porcupine Caribou. But the idea that a Native corporation is trying to open the Refuge makes this a tricky issue, it's hard to apply any kind of label. Yes, the Inupiat are shareholders of Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, but the power and direction of the corporation lies in the hands of a few individuals."

In the end, the Association of Hawaiian Civic Clubs was persuaded to vote against the

resolution to support the Gwich'in struggle. Burrows said, "Robin Danner made an impact with the idea that the land in question is not the Gwich'in homeland, but the Inupiat homeland. And she persisted with the belief that Hawaiian support for the Gwich'in is maha'oi (brazen). But as Indigenous people we share the same relationship with the land - from the land derives our culture and spirituality."

The funding that has flowed from Arctic Slope Regional Corporation to the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement shows that the Inupiat people appreciate the support from both Robin and Jade Danner. Cultural exchanges that flow among relatives are deep and lasting. However, when Jade Danner published her letter in the Star Bulletin she neglected to mention that she billed Arctic Power for writing it, as part of her contractual agreement. And Arctic Power's only concern is to represent big oil, the state of Alaska, and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation's desire to open the Refuge to drilling.

(Concluded in Part Five)