

Inouye bill gives Indians role in managing wildlife

Federal land managers would be required to include tribes in their decision-making

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FAIRBANKS, Alaska >> Sen. Daniel Inouye has proposed legislation that would require federal land managers to enter into agreements with Alaska Native organizations or Indian tribes to co-manage fish and wildlife.

Inouye, D-Hawaii, said his bill is not intended to expand or diminish the powers of tribes, but rather to recognize their status as separate governments that deserve a voice in fish and wildlife management decisions.

At a Senate Indian Affairs Committee hearing Thursday in Washington, tribal representatives from Alaska and elsewhere praised Inouye, the ranking Democrat on the committee, for introducing the Native American Fish and Wildlife Resources Management Act of 2004.

Tribal representatives said they already are working on many levels with federal and state wildlife managers, but they often lack the money to employ the necessary people. Also, managers do not always understand tribes' rightful roles and must be educated, they said.

Inouye's bill would not provide such money. Rather, it directs the secretary of the interior to sign work and co-management agreements with tribes and to review programs to see where agencies can cooperate more with tribes.

Randy Mayo, first chief of the Stevens Village tribal council, said during the hearing that the bill would help resource-management programs such as those developed by his tribe.

The majority of the tribal government's seven full-time and 15 part-time employees now work in the resources program.

"We have cobbled our resource program together with

unsteady funding for many years now," he said.

Mayo is also board chairman of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, a 10-member coalition of tribes in the Yukon Flats region. The council has negotiated an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to do a few jobs on the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge — surveying moose, interviewing villagers about hunting, identifying public access easements and maintaining a building and vehicle in Fort Yukon.

Inouye's bill would direct the department to enter into more of those agreements, the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reported in yesterday's editions.

Inouye said the legislation would recognize and strengthen the relationship between American Indians and wildlife.

"For thousands of years prior to European contact, tribes ... served as responsible stewards of natural resources on millions of acres of land that were under their dominion and control," he said. "There were no shortages of resources in earlier times because the tribes regulated fishing and hunting and gathering in a manner that would ensure the protection and conservation of precious natural resources. They harvested only what was necessary for their subsistence."

While Inouye's bill is national in scope, it has one section tailored just for Alaska. The bill states that "upon the request of an Indian tribal government or Alaska Native fish and wildlife organization, the secretary shall enter into a contract, compact, cooperative agreement or a grant" arrangement with that government or organization.

Inouye's bill defines Indian fish and wildlife as "any species of animal or plant life for which Indians have a right to fish, hunt, trap or gather for subsistence, ceremonial, recreational or commercial purposes."

Inouye said the bill was a "work in progress" that had been drafted by tribal organizations.