

H.R. 4668: Point Spencer Coast Guard and Public-Private Sector Infrastructure Development Facilitation and Land Conveyance Act

Introduced May 15, 2014

Background:

Point Spencer is a small 2,000 plus-acre spit of land located in the Bering Strait region of Alaska and was used for thousands of years by the Inupiat Eskimos and their ancestors. Long before the coming of Western settlers, Point Spencer served as a major trading hub for the intercontinental movement of items between indigenous groups in present day Alaska and eastern Eurasia.

With the “discovery” of whales north of Bering Strait in the 1840’s by non-Natives, Point Spencer and adjacent Port Clarence, served as a safe harbor for the vessels of the American Whaling industry. In 1850-1852, vessels searching for the lost Franklin expedition over-wintered in Port Clarence. From 1865-1867 the area saw activity related to the Western Union Telegraph project, an uncompleted plan to link North America with Russia across Bering Strait. Point Spencer-Port Clarence continued to serve as a major harbor for the Revenue Cutter Service (forerunner of the USCG) during the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Throughout this period of initial contact, the residents of Bering Strait provided food, safe harbor, and guiding services to the visiting EuroAmerican ventures.

Because of the use of this spit of land by indigenous Peoples, the ancestors of those who now comprise the BSNC, for thousands of years before contact by non-Natives, the land is of great importance archaeologically and culturally to Alaska Natives living in the region.

After passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, the purpose of which was to help settle aboriginal land claims of Alaska Natives and also help clear the way so that the Trans-Alaska pipeline right-of-way could be secured and the pipeline constructed in the 1970s, BSNC filed a selection to Point Spencer in 1976 as a 14(h)(8) selection under ANCSA. Key among the reasons for this selection by BSNC was the recognition of the historically strategic place of Point Spencer within Bering Strait history, and to help ensure that the artifacts and archaeological resources from their ancestors would be better protected and the land would be available for future purposes.

However, because Point Spencer had been withdrawn in 1962 from appropriation under the mining and mineral leasing and other relevant laws of the U.S. so as to permit the construction of a Coast Guard LORAN (Port Clarence long-range radar site) station in 1966 at Point Spencer, the lands were unavailable for BSNC to select or to use unless and until the U.S. no longer needed the lands for the LORAN site. Two years after BSNC filed its selection at Point

Spencer, the State of Alaska in 1978 filed a selection application under the Statehood Act on most of the land there and then top-filed on the entire parcel in 1993.

In 2010, the LORAN site at Point Spencer (named the Port Clarence LORAN station) was closed, hardened and abandoned by the Coast Guard and LORAN was thereafter no longer utilized for navigation purposes. At that time, BSNC began to explore the potential for fulfilling its aspirations for selecting Point Spencer that began 34 years earlier.

BSNC contracted in 2010 to have a geomorphic study of Point Spencer undertaken to determine the long-term stability of the landform. BSNC also conducted an economic study of the lands and began an analysis of the hazardous materials contamination that the Coast Guard generated during its years of operating the LORAN facility and cataloguing any necessary clean-up that would be required to make some of the abandoned site useable. Working with the shipping and response industry, BSNC has also begun developing a phased infrastructure development plan for the Point Spencer lands. Such infrastructure could play a key role in fulfilling the purposes outlined above as well as in enabling the U.S. to pursue and protect national security, transportation, and potential economic interests in the region as the sea lanes open up and natural resource development is considered in the Arctic.

Potential for Job Creation:

The bill seeks to provide for public sector interests and at the same time ensure that priceless archaeological and cultural artifacts of ancestors of the Bering Straits region are protected. Unfortunately, many artifacts have been allowed to be taken and sold abroad during the years of use for the LORAN site and post abandonment. This legislation would provide potential economic opportunities for the region's people, where villages can face poverty rates of over 40% and unemployment in some communities reaches nearly 50%. If wise use is made of this area, the essential needs of each stakeholder can likely be addressed.

Economic opportunities in this region of rural Alaska are imperative to be achieved. Suicide rates among young rural Alaska Natives are extremely alarming and the Bering Straits region experiences that tragedy time and time again. Much of the underlying cause of these tragic incidents come from young people not having work and vocational training opportunities in an area where their ancestors have inhabited for generations. While development at Point Spencer would not be a solution to all social maladies and challenges of the region's people, it would be a remarkable advancement for the people and at the same time serve the federal, state, and private sector interests.