

10th February 2005

Representative Jay Ramras
Chair, House Resources Committee

Honorable Representative Ramras:

I am writing to you in regard to the University Land Grant Bill HB130 for which you held a hearing yesterday, 9th February. First let me introduce myself, so that you understand where my loyalties lie. I am presently a faculty member at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the seat of the University's land grant and the holder of the land grant status for the University of Alaska. I am a graduate of UAF, and hold a Masters Degree in Engineering Physics from the University of Alaska. I have been a faculty member in the Cooperative Extension Service as Energy and Housing Specialist since 1982. My entire adult and professional life has been associated with the University. If there is some attitude beyond loyalty, love, and dedication, then that expresses what I feel toward this University.

I am also a student of the concept of the land grant university. The Cooperative Extension Service is a major element of that fine American idea. The Land Grant University idea has led me to certain philosophical concepts and conclusions about how it should function.

First, looking at the history of our university land grant (I would refer any interested person to a treatise on the history of Alaska's Land Grant by my fellow professor at UAF, Terence Cole, done at the behest of the present Board of Regents Chair, Brian Rogers back in the early 90s) you will find we deserve a better stake than we have. There can be little argument about this. Increasing the Land Grant is a valuable and worthy idea. But, if you look at the history of other university land grants throughout the country, most of those land grants have been exhausted by simple disposal and sale of the land. The original purpose of Land Grants, of course, was to use them to fund the operation of universities for the benefit of the public as agricultural and mechanical colleges. There is to my knowledge not one example of the land grant actually being used to sustain the continuing development, growth, and operation of a university. Most today are exhausted and their value spent.

Holding any new Land Grant to a sustainability goal is a concept befitting a university land grant, and that's where we should take the University of Alaska. Let me be very clear on what I mean by this. If a land grant is to become useful and sustainable, a real model for civilization, (which I feel all universities should be), then it must come with constraints that it be used sustainably. The land grant must not be disposable in the normal sense (by sale). Simply put, the Land Grant land should not be sold, ever. The operation of the land grant should be a model for the University, the State, and especially for the students. It should always serve as a model of stewardship by keeping land functionally supportive of the rest of the operation of civil society in perpetuity, protected by stewardship, and used for income and benefits, of course, for the University.

The students should be an integral part of Land Grant management, and could be trained in that management through experience with the University's land grant,

while at the University. This experience would be direct professional development for future operation of the land grant. That same operational philosophy, along with the professionally capable students can then be utilized by the state government for managing its lands and resources. If this is not the plan for our Land Grant, then it will simply result in nothing more than the land grant becoming an annual land auction and disposal mechanism for moving what is now government-held land into private hands for a one-time, short-term gain for the University. Converting real natural assets so fundamental to life, such as land is and will always be, into nothing more than money, is a problematic idea. By holding the land in trust, and in perpetuity, with the means to allow it to be productive, the Land Grant will always serve the state and University as long as management is sound.

Unless we can present a new approach to how the University receives, manages, and fundamentally protects its interests in a land grant, then this whole exercise is pointless and will result in nothing more than has ever happened with any other university land grant.

Finally let me close by saying that if you are going to proceed with a land grant, you should do it with several conditions attached: 1) The land shall not be disposable permanently by sale, ever in perpetuity. 2) It shall be managed for sustained, reasonable yield. 3) It is leasable and useful for resource extraction but should be required to be restored to as close to its original state as possible after resource extraction has occurred. 4) And finally, it should be created as a model for how a university and a civilization should be operated with the object of long-term sustainability as its focal point.

Unless this is done it is difficult to be supportive of the Land Grant as posed in HB130. With that approach, it becomes nothing more than a way to transfer land into private holdings through a mechanism of a university land grant to be sold for profit.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. I hope you will deliberate long and hard, on this important issue. I encourage you to entertain these four tenets I've suggested for the University's land grant. This will make it so much more than it has ever been in the past. It could become a triumphant example that we could hold up as a national and world model of stewardship and good land management. It would be an everlasting credit to you, our legislators, who aided good stewardship and responsible land management for the benefit of our students, and ourselves.

Sincerely,

Richard D. Seifert
Professor, UAF and Class of 1973