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Local News

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Posted on: Saturday, May 13, 2006

Akaka bill may be debated in June

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

Supporters and opponents of a Native Hawaiian recognition bill are preparing for pitched battle after yesterday's news that the long-stalled measure could be debated on the floor of the U.S. Senate in early June.

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Sen. Daniel Akaka, chief sponsor of the bill, announced on the Senate floor that when the senators return from their May recess, Majority Leader Bill Frist will petition for a procedural move known as cloture to force the bill to the floor despite opponents' objections. Approval of the petition by 60 of the 100 senators would force a vote on the bill, which would establish a federally recognized Native Hawaiian entity.

Akaka and other supporters have fought for six years to get the measure passed. In his prepared text of remarks made to colleagues on the Senate floor, Akaka said: "This is an issue of importance to all of the people of Hawai'i, and this is not a native versus non-native issue in Hawai'i. Rather, this is about authorizing a process for the people of Hawai'i to be able to address longstanding issues resulting from a tragic, poignant period in our history."

DELAYS LAST YEAR

A vote on the bill had been expected last summer but half a dozen Republican senators blocked it. Frist had promised a vote on cloture during the fall but the Senate became preoccupied with Hurricane Katrina relief.

A cloture procedure, if approved, would open the way for up to 30 hours of Senate debate, essentially halting other business. An attempt to reach Frist's office for comment yesterday was unsuccessful.

Congress is scheduled to go back into session on June 5. The Senate may hold the vote on cloture the following day, which could lead to the bill being debated as early as June 8.

Leaders of various factions were reluctant yesterday to predict the outcome of the cloture vote.

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"It is time for us to pull out all of the stops and get all of the senators convinced and get educated on the issue," said Clyde Namu'o, administrator of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, which has been among the main backers of federal recognition.

H. William Burgess, of the group Aloha For All, which opposes the bill, said he has no plans to fly to Washington to lobby senators. Nonetheless, he said, "It behooves us all to get out as much public education about what the bill would actually do and what the actual impact on Hawai'i would be."

Namu'o said he and OHA Chairwoman Haunani Apoliona flew to Washington and met with Frist on Thursday. Also sitting in during the half-hour meeting was local filmmaker Edgy Lee, who produced the movie "Hawaiians Reflecting Spirit," which looks into the pursuit of sovereignty by Hawaiians, Namu'o said.

While Frist has not seen the 56-minute film, people close to the majority leader did. "His friends were moved by it and encouraged him to meet with us," Namu'o said.

"We told him that people who have worked with him and for him have told us that he is a man of honor and we really wanted to reaffirm his commitment to bring up the bill," Namu'o said.

Frist told them at the end of the meeting that the cloture vote would take place the week after Memorial Day, he said.

The Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act of 2005, also known as the Akaka bill, creates a process that would eventually lead to the establishment of a Native Hawaiian government that would be recognized by the U.S. government.

It's been a tumultuous few weeks for the bill after months of inactivity. On May 4, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights voted to recommend that Congress not pass the bill.

STATED RATIONALE

A draft of the commission's report said the measure "would discriminate on the basis of race or national origin and further subdivide the American people into discrete subgroups accorded varying degrees of privilege."

While opponents of the bill applauded the recommendation, the conclusion was rejected by two of the seven commission members. Members of a local advisory panel of the commission also denounced it for failing to consider their views.

On Monday, the usually mild-mannered Akaka vowed to take to the Senate floor each day to educate his colleagues about the details of the bill and the issue of sovereignty until a cloture vote was scheduled, a promise he kept through yesterday.

"This is about establishing parity for Hawai'i's indigenous peoples in federal policies," he said. "This is about clarifying the existing political and legal relationship between Native Hawaiians and the United States."

Burgess' group believes the bill is race-based and would set a dangerous precedent for the United States. Burgess said he expects the commission's recommendation to have a "huge" impact on senators who may be undecided.

"This is the agency whose main job is to review proposed actions and

events and determine whether they are in accordance with the civil rights laws of the United States," he said.

Ikaika Hussey of Hui Pu, an umbrella group of Hawaiian organizations that oppose the Akaka bill, said senators should hold a hearing in Hawai'i before voting on it. They would find that many who support the measure are out to protect their entitlement programs while there are many others who believe the bill does not go far enough in addressing the concerns of Hawaiians, he said.

"It is a welfare approach to Native Hawaiians," Hussey said. "More glaringly, this bill would close off any land claims which is at the heart of the sovereignty issue."

Gov. Linda Lingle said she does not plan to travel to Washington for the expected vote but will send letters to Republican senators repeating her support for the bill. She said she will also send an analysis by state Attorney General Mark Bennett that counters criticisms made in the civil rights commission report.

The governor said she will also try to speak with the Republican co-sponsors of the bill and keep in contact with Akaka about any other role she might play.

"We continue to support this bill and we think it's important," Lingle said.

Staff writer Derrick DePledge contributed to this report.

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