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Alaska panel plans summit on 'federal overreach'

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By BECKY BOHRER — Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska — A state advisory panel is holding a summit this month on Alaska's relationship with the federal government and areas of perceived overreach by the feds.

Republican Sen. John Coghill of North Pole said Thursday that the Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas isn't interested in just having a complaining session during the Aug. 12-13 summit in Anchorage. Coghill serves on the panel, and said there are several goals for the meeting.

During the last session, in which the issue of perceived overreach occupied a fair bit of time in the GOP-controlled Legislature, Coghill said it became apparent there needed to be a history review to better understand agreements the state had made with the feds, as well as court cases, rather than address the issue through piecemeal resolutions.

The upcoming summit is expected to include such an overview, he said, along with looking at where the federal government is pushing the limits and improving relationships with the feds.

Stan Leaphart, the commission's executive director, said in a release this week that the intent is to develop an "action plan" that can be implemented by the Legislature, governor and congressional delegation.

The federal government is the dominant landowner in Alaska, a factor in the love-hate relationship the state has with the feds. Republican Gov. Sean Parnell hasn't been shy about pushing back on issues in which he argues the feds have overstepped their bounds. State officials have said lawsuits are filed as a last resort. In recent years, the state has sued over such things as certain Endangered Species Act protections, rules intended to limit pollution from large ships and requiring that Alaska get federal approval for changes to election rules or plans.

The cruise ship case is pending, and records show the election case hasn't been dismissed though the U.S. Supreme Court in a related matter this year found unconstitutional a provision of the federal Voting Rights Act that determines which states must get Justice Department approval for proposed election changes. That decision effectively did away with the preapproval mandate, unless Congress comes up with a new formula.

Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, said the discussion about federal overreach "seems like political overkill at this point." Wielechowski is a member of the Senate State Affairs Committee, which held hearings on the issue this past session.

He said he thinks most Alaskans have concerns with the state's relationship with the federal government but doesn't know how much is served through "weeks and weeks of hearings, which really accomplish nothing."

"You definitely want to raise your concerns but in the end, I think developing relationships is probably the better way to go," he said.

The agenda does not include any speakers from federal agencies. Coghill said the intent of the meeting was not to "put them out. It was really (about) a conversation in the state to say, How do we engage them better?"

Part of the process will be learning how to talk to the various agencies, Coghill said, noting that the federal government — even within departments — isn't monolithic.

The next step would be to bring in the feds, "but it would be wrong for us to do that unprepared," he said.

Online:

Citizens' Advisory Commission on Federal Areas: <http://dnr.alaska.gov/commis/cacfa/index.htm>

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