

Written Testimony before U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs

H.R. 231 “Canyon Village Land Conveyance Act”
February 6, 2018

Testimony on behalf of Doyon, Limited
Submitted by Sarah Obed, Vice President of External Affairs

My name is Sarah Obed, and I am an Athabascan shareholder serving as the Vice President External Affairs of Doyon, Limited. On behalf of the Doyon, Limited Board of Directors, our 19,700 shareholders, and employees, this is a written statement of support for the Canyon Village Land Conveyance Act.

Doyon is one of the thirteen Native regional corporations established by Congress under the terms of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971. Doyon’s mission is to promote the economic and social well-being of our present and future shareholders, to strengthen our Native way of life, and to protect and enhance our land and resources.

Doyon is the regional corporation for Interior Alaska, and is the largest private landowner in Alaska, with a land entitlement under ANCSA of more than 12.5 million acres. Our lands extend from the Brooks Range on the north to the Alaska Range on the south. The Alaska-Canada border forms the eastern border and the western portion almost reaches the Norton Sound. Our lands also include the area covering the original Canyon Village land selections, and as such, Doyon, Limited is a strong supporter of the introduction and passage of legislation authorizing the conveyance of these lands to the Native people of Canyon Village.

Members of Canyon Village continue to hold their traditional site at Canyon Village of historical and cultural importance—and have long advocated for their land selections authorized by ANCSA. In meetings between Doyon and shareholders who represent Canyon Village and Kian Tr’ee Village Corporation over the last forty years, we note the consistency in their position despite the decades of frustration.

Recognized by Congress as a Native village subject to ANCSA, Canyon Village was originally established in 1962 on vacant and unappropriated federal land located on the Porcupine River in northeast Alaska, by Alaska Natives from Fort Yukon who wished to live an independent subsistence lifestyle. The Bureau of Indian Affairs subsequently certified Kian Tr’ee Corporation as the Native group corporation for Canyon Village, and in June 1976, Kian Tr’ee Corporation filed its land selection with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) pursuant to section 14(h)(2) of ANCSA for conveyance to the Native group.

Regrettably, due to a series of events outside of their control, for 40 years now the Athabascan people of Canyon Village have been denied the benefit of the settlement of aboriginal land claims provided for by ANCSA. First, in 1965, BLM withdrew the aboriginal lands in and around Canyon Village as part of a powersite classification for the then-proposed Rampart Dam project on the Yukon River. Then in 1980, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA)

expanded the boundary of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to include the land surrounding Canyon Village. Although the dam project was abandoned well before 1980, the federal government's delay in formally revoking the withdrawal for that project (which did not happen until 1990) prevented the completion of conveyance in the intervening years before the lands were included in ANWR.

Furthermore, the unauthorized and mistaken relinquishment in 1977 by the Federal Townsite Trustee of a nearly 300-acre tract included in Canyon Village's approved townsite petition, resulted in the relinquishment of all but 30 acres of the original application. The erroneous relinquishment on behalf of the agency representative was made in the mistaken belief that those lands would be made part of the Canyon Village ANCSA entitlement. The relinquishment of the townsite petition only adds to the unfortunate circumstances that the Alaska Native founders of Canyon Village and their descendants have suffered in their efforts to obtain ownership of their Native lands.

As a result of these actions and inactions, Kian Tr'ee is today one of only two certified Native group corporations in Alaska that has neither a conveyance nor a pending conveyance arranged by special legislation or negotiation. The particular lands selected by the group in 1976 remain of significant cultural and historic relevance and importance to the remaining founders (very few, unfortunately, who may live to see their aboriginal lands returned to their people) and their descendants. As a result of the unique circumstances that have stood in the way of conveyance, legislation is necessary for these lands to be conveyed.

In closing, Doyon strongly supports and urges Congress to pass legislation to finally complete the long overdue conveyance of the aboriginal lands that were selected by the Native people of Canyon Village now 40 years ago.