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April 11, 2019

The Honorable Gary Stevens
Alaska State Legislature
Juneau, Alaska 99811

Dear Senator Stevens:

Thank you for introducing Senate Joint Resolution 10 calling for a solution to the University of Alaska's land grant deficit. This resolution adds the Legislature's support for helping to remove an obstacle for UA to reach our full potential for our long term service to Alaska.

Starkly put, UA is a land grant college in name more than in fact. The Statehood Act made what Congress thought were adequate provisions for UA to have its remaining land entitlements (under prior federal laws dating from 1862, 1915, and 1929) fulfilled by the joint efforts of the Department of the Interior and the newly created State of Alaska. Unfortunately, decisions and/or lapses at both the state and federal levels of government resulted in UA receiving only about 112,000 acres, falling short of its full entitlement by a gap of about 360,000 acres. America's largest state received a smaller land grant for higher education than its smallest – in fact, smaller than every other state except Delaware (90,000 acres) and Hawaii (no land, but a large monetary appropriation in lieu of land).

College land grants are an asset to higher education in America. Originated by the Morrill Act of 1862, states are conveyed federal lands to be dedicated to the support of their public colleges. This concept has advanced education and economic development. For example, UA's meagerly-endowed Land Grant Trust Fund earnings support the UA Scholars Program, which awards scholarships to the top ten percent of graduates from every Alaska high school each year. If the University is to continue fulfilling our mission to provide high quality higher education for Alaskans and maintain our pre-eminence as America's Arctic University, we will need to turn our status as a land-grant college from historical fiction into a future reality.

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The Alaska Legislature has made repeated attempts to fulfill the State's part of its responsibilities to UA under the Alaska Statehood Act, starting in 1959 when the first Alaska Legislature passed a bill reserving 1 million acres for UA (vetoed by Governor Egan).

In both 2000 and 2005 the Legislature conveyed approximately 250,000 acres to the University. Unfortunately, in 2009 the Alaska Supreme Court ruled that the enactment violated the anti-dedication clause of the Alaska Constitution.

The University finds itself in a classic "Catch-22" position in resolving our land grant deficit. As former UA President Wood put it, state and federal authorities always agreed that UA should receive additional land and agreed that the other party should provide it.

SJR 10 helps point the way to a solution. UA is convinced that there must be a way, consistently with the Alaska Constitution, to fulfill the intent of the Statehood Act that UA's land entitlement be completed, but this most likely will require a collaborative effort by both levels of government, as SJR 10 encourages. Dedications are explicitly permissible under the Alaska Constitution when required for State participation in a federal program.

Solving this problem will require cooperative effort among our elected representatives in Congress, federal executive branch officials, our Governor, and our state legislature. As the state and federal governments work toward resolving the other remaining issues under Statehood Act selections, it is important that the UA land grant gap be one of those issues. With proper alignment, it is exciting to think that we may be able to resolve a problem for UA with roots that date back before the 1959 creation of the State, before the 1917 creation of the University, even before the 1867 Treaty of Acquisition, to when President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act in 1862. I look forward to engaging with you in this challenging, but important initiative.

Thank you again for sponsoring SJR 10 and helping lay the foundation to resolve the University's long-standing land grant gap.

Kind regards,



James R. Johnsen
President, University of Alaska