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Allen Epps, Glenn Juday

Interviewer: Scott Sterling

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Scott Sterling introduced Allen Epps and Glenn Juday. They will be talking about forestry in Alaska and Homesteading. Sterling said there are number of bills in the Alaska Legislature dealing with these two topics and asked Allen Epps to talk about the history of homesteading in Alaska. Epps said when Alaska was still a territory that was one of the few ways private land could be acquired was under the Federal Homesteading Act at that point in time. Most of the state of Alaska was open to homesteading at that time. Since statehood that has changed and up until the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act passed and until the Organic Act for the Bureau of Land Management there was homesteading available. With the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act the secretary withdrew the federal lands except for a few isolated townships scattered around the state. Since that time there has been an array of state bills introduced to deal with the issue of homesteading. He thought more that just the charisma of homesteading there are the issues of real economics and the real availability of land today. One of the things that has to be recognized is the need for more than 160 acres to make an economic unit (unless there is a specialized type of agriculture such as greenhouses) or employment to go along with the homesteading. That means being located near a major metropolitan area which are located in organized boroughs. The boroughs have already selected the prime agricultural lands within those areas because of the value of the land for other uses. Even if the state passes a homestead bill people will be forced to go beyond commuting distance in order to establish a homestead and have to commute to support a homestead. He said even though homesteading would sound good in actual application it wouldn't be a very positive thing. Sterling said the state has made a big commitment to large scale agriculture projects and to other land disposal schemes. He wondered how homesteading ties into all this. Epps said the idea of "frontierism" is still carrying through. The problem in the west is there were two failures on the land before the third owner makes it. The third owner is acquiring two or three homesteads. Most of them are farming larger areas than 160 acres. Alaska has tried in commercial areas to develop projects of a scale that didn't have to have those failures. If they want lifestyle property Epps said they have to take a hard look at how they are going to support the economics of the people that are going to use their lifestyle properties. If they need some employment they might have to look at lands within boroughs.

Sterling said there's a natural concept in natural resources called multiple use and sustain yield. He asked if homesteading was the best use of any given piece of property in the state. Juday said the problem in Alaska is the more suitable lands are a lot more limited than the landscapes. When you begin to analyze carefully to find permafrost free lands, with good soils and within commuting distances of job centers you find there isn't a surplus of land. There are real land use conflicts. sons. Epps said he agrees. He has looked at ownership patterns and the identified ag soils in the state. The Soil Conservation Service has identified twenty million acres of agricultural profitable soils statewide, but you eliminate federal domains and it is half that. The Native village corporations and regional corporations and state-

owned land reduces it to about five million acres. With other land uses it brings the total usable ag lands to one to two million acres. Those lands have other values as well including timber, recreation, wildlife, industrial and housing values and these are conflicts. Juday said Alaska has about 375 million acres with about 106 million acres are biologically capable of growing timber. This includes the black spruce out on the tundra and bogs. Northern Alaska component that meets the standard definition of commercial forest land (capable of growing 20 cubic feet of timber per acre per year) amounts to only 22 and a half million acres. About half has to be subtracted because it is scattered along rivers and in the far corners of state.

Sterling asked what a person could do make their homestead a success. Epps believes the state is doing the public a disservice when they enact a piece of legislation. He said you can look at the last two or three years of land disposals that happened within DNR (Department of Natural Resources). There were parcels left on the table. The raw economic facts or access or other component is dictating it isn't all that is all trumped up to be. He said we live in a changing environment and to go back to the 1860s (when the Homesteading Act was started) is ridiculous.

Sterling commented on Senate Bill 108 which deals with the Tanana Valley. Juday said the bill establishes a state forest system. It provides a mechanism by which the governor can recommend other state forests elsewhere in the state. Technically they are supposed to come out of the area planning process. After lands have been subtracted out for disposal, the lands for wildlife habitat, and the lands for mining development the governor may recommend to the legislature establishment of lands that are suitable for retention and public ownership and the production of forests and related wildland resource products. Sterling asked if the state forest lands would be managed along the same lines as the national forests. Juday said if you would put them on a continuum from less intensive to more intensive management the state forest would be over on the more intensive management side. He said there will be a broad range of uses met if Senate Bill 108 is passed. He said they are talking about lands that will be heavily used, but on a sustained yield multiple use basis.

Sterling asked Epps if there is any coordination between the agricultural future and the future with state forests. Epps said where they have detailed soil surveys there has been a real effort on the part of the drafters of the legislation to eliminate the high productive soils from the state forests. Where they don't have detailed soil surveys there probably isn't a strong overlap with agricultural soils and timber areas. Even if there are opportunities for inholdings for agricultural use. He said the grazing opportunities could be in there as a multiple use.

[00:18:16] Sterling said there has been controversy about Senate Bill 108 mostly because of claims about land disposals. Juday said this proposal is coming slightly ahead of the Tanana Basin Plan. He said it follows those guidelines closely. This bill comes out of a process that tries to be responsive to the need for private ownership of land.

Sterling asked Epps if state forests make homesteads more viable. Epps said that is a distinct possibility. It may be an incentive for someone who wants to homestead. He doesn't see the bill as something that will solve all the problems and may create additional problems. Sterling talked about the federal government subsidizing the timber industry in the 1950s. Juday said people don't realize we do have a timber industry in the Interior already. Right now, the locally produced wood products capture about 15 percent of the local market. They are not speculating if there is a market. The problem is the locally produced timber has a bad reputation for quality and it will have trouble making inroads in the market

unless it improves in quality. They hope with the establishment of the state forests they will stabilize the land base. It should provide a stable climate to allow investment to take place in new operations or in upgrading the ones they have now. One of the problems they have now is warping which can be alleviated by complete drying with a kiln or proper air drying. There would have to be investment in a kiln or having a year's inventory. There is no incentive to do that right now. If they do have a stable land base then entrepreneurs will respond to the opportunity.

Sterling asked about rationalizing the land disposal program or homesteads. Epps said that has been run by emotion since statehood. A lot of the criticism of DNR right now is they are not releasing land close enough to Anchorage or Fairbanks or Palmer. The boroughs already have the parcels of land that have any value. He thinks the boroughs have the desirable lands and there should be pressure on them instead of DNR for land disposal. Juday said it is conceivable there are lands on the Nenana Ridge area that could fit into the category of reasonable commuting distance, but they are the productive heart of the Interior forests. A strong case can be made for the forest production values of those lands.