

Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act, or the Akaka Bill

The Akaka Bill is the common name applied to the Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act (S. 147). Proposed in the United States Congress between 2000 and the present, the legislation seeks to achieve for Native Hawaiians the same federal recognition and right to self-governance that most Native American tribes possess. It takes its common name from U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka, D-HI, a Native Hawaiian who is the chief proponent of the legislation.

Under the bill, which has been revised several times since its introduction, the federal government would formally recognize Hawaiians -- as it does American Indians and native Alaskans -- as a native population. The bill would safeguard approximately 160 federal programs that benefit Native Hawaiians, as well as state programs such as the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, endangered under a series of lawsuits filed over the last decade that attack Native Hawaiian programs as racially discriminatory.

For several years procedural holds blocked the Akaka Bill from reaching the Senate floor for debate.

On June 8, 2006, the senate voted on a procedural move known as cloture which would have forced the bill to the floor for a final debate and up-or-down tally. During discussion preceding the vote, Akaka Bill supporters said it would grant Hawaiians the same rights and status already afforded to America's two other indigenous groups, Native Americans and Alaska Natives. They also said it would help rectify more than a century of injustice following the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom with the backing of American troops. Opponents said the Akaka Bill would set up an unconstitutional race-based government and set a precedent that could lead to the balkanizing of America along ethnic lines.

The vote proceeded with a 56-41 tally in favor of cloture -- four votes short of the 60 votes needed to advance the measure to the Senate floor.

Akaka Bill supporters await another opportunity, while considering alternative legislation to protect programs benefitting Hawaiians that are already in place.