

Fast Action Vowed On Guam Bills

By John E. Simonds
Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON — The chairman of a Senate subcommittee has promised quick action on legislation to return federally owned lands to Guam, but it may be many weeks before the bill reaches the Senate floor.

"I will be pleased to move ahead with these matters as quickly as possible and let you know as soon as we are able to schedule these matters for hearings and action," Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La., said in a letter to Rep. Antonio B. Won Pat, who asked Johnston a few days ago about progress on the measure passed by the House on March 18.

One of the bills would release from

the Interior Department control of all offshore lands on Guam and the Virgin Islands between the high-tide mark and the three-mile limit. A second bill, applying only to Guam, would direct the President to decide within one year which federal lands could be released to local control. About 10,000 acres, mostly under military control but not being used, are expected to be transferred under this bill.

Although Johnston pledged quick action, James P. Beirne, the subcommittee staff assistant, said Saturday he doubts if there would be any developments before mid-May. Interior Committee members will be busy with energy legislation until then, he said.

On top of the calendar problems, Beirne said, he expected certain objections to features of the legislation. The idea of allowing the President a year to decide which military land is needed is unsatisfactory, Beirne said.

Won Pat had asked for a 90-day period in which the President would decide which land was needed, but had to agree to a year to get the bill past Republican members of the House Interior Committee.

Beirne said there was no point in letting the President decide on the release of the land because "if you leave it up to the President, you know who's going to get his ear - the Pentagon - and they'll never release any of it."

Another factor, Beirne said, was the status of negotiations with the Northern Marianas for the use by the Defense Department of the island of Tinian in exchange for a new relationship between those islands and the U.S. Beirne said there was a "touchy problem" involved in making sure Guam and its rival neighboring islands got equitable deals on their military land.

Probably the best way to determine how much land could be returned to Guam, Beirne said, is for the subcommittee "to call the Department of Defense up here and lock the doors, kick all the staff out and find out just what's necessary over there and what isn't."