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Critics Target Hawaiian Native Bill

By **Kate Ackley**
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With a vote on a bill to create a Native Hawaiian government expected later this week, a battery of opponents have converged on Capitol Hill to face off against a well-heeled group of advocates for the measure.

Many of these would-be lobbyists have flown in, some on their own dime, from Hawaii. And conservative groups with no connection to the Aloha State have actively turned against the measure on ideological grounds.

There is definitely a gearing-up on this, said one Senate aide, who opposes the bill sponsored by Sen. Daniel Akaka (D-Hawaii). The measure would create a similar governmental status for Native Hawaiians as that of American Indian tribes. Sam Slom, a Republican state Senator in Hawaii, said Monday, "I'm getting on a plane in about six hours, coming to Washington." Slom, who opposes the Akaka bill, said he planned meetings with the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Tax Reform and other conservative groups who oppose it. He also planned to meet with GOP Senators and aides.

Slom's visit will overlap with a delegation led by Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle (R), who is here to push for enactment of the bill. That side is backed by a team from the law and lobbying firm Patton Boggs. "I'm coming on my own," said Slom, who added that he is paying part of his travel costs, and the Grassroot Institute of Hawaii, which opposes the Akaka bill, is paying the other portion.

Slom said most of his allies oppose the bill on the grounds that it would create a race-based government. Other

opponents, mostly Native Hawaiians, want full independence for the state and say Akaka's measure doesn't go far enough. But Slom's opposition has different roots. He's concerned that it hasn't faced a vote by residents of Hawaii and that it has implications for the status of Native Hawaiian lands, he said. "I'm not going back into the 1890s," said Slom, who is also president and executive director of Small Business Hawaii.

Donalyn Dela Cruz, press secretary to Akaka, said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) had committed to Akaka that he would file a cloture petition on Tuesday on the motion to proceed to the bill. As of press time Tuesday, Frist still had not filed the petition, without which the measure would be stalled. But Dela Cruz said Akaka's office remained confident. "It's still on, as far as we understand," she said. Dela Cruz added that opponents to the bill are hardly unified and have varying interests. "If the Senate proceeds to this, we're maybe looking at a week of floor time," said a GOP Senate aide. Conservatives are very concerned about this legislation and plan a series of amendments if the Senate goes to this. It's hoped that we can defeat the cloture vote." This aide added that the vote count is very close.

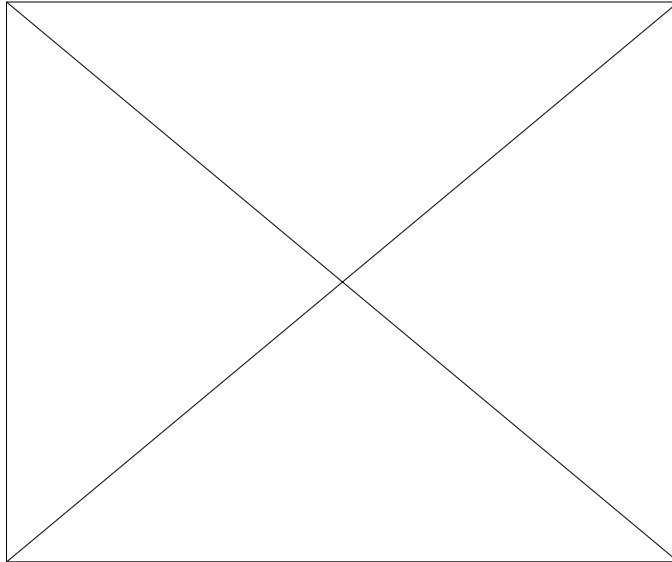
Senators who openly are opposed include Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.). Senate sources said Majority Whip Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has been whipping against the bill. Brian Darling, director of Senate relations at Heritage, said the measure is race-based and should be stopped. Darling said Heritage doesn't lobby "we just educate. And we've been educating as to how terrible an idea this is." Lobbyists for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs including Benjamin Ginsberg of Patton Boggs and Alex Vogel of Mehlman Vogel Castagnetti did not return a call seeking comment. Leon Siu, a representative of the Koani Foundation, which ultimately favors Hawaiian independence from the United States, said he is against the Akaka bill because it has not been vetted by Hawaiian voters. And, he said, the measure is "driving a wedge into our otherwise harmonious" state.

Dela Cruz said her boss is "proud of the multicultural society that exists in Hawaii, but he is mindful of the longstanding issues resulting from a painful history." The

bill, she said, is a start to a process to move forward. Siu, who is in D.C. this week lobbying against the bill, said he paid his own way here. "Reception is good so far," he said. Ehu Kekahu Cardwell, director of the Koani Foundation, said Hawaiians should be given the chance to vote on the matter "instead of having a federal bill forced down their throats."

Cardwell's foundation has been in meetings with groups such as Heritage. "We're willing to work with any reasonable groups that are interested in the same outcome we are," he said. Cardwell said although his group favors total independence from the U.S., that entity would not be made up of only of Native Hawaiians. "Basically this bill is stealing Hawaiians' rights, and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs is driving the getaway car," he said. A Frist spokeswoman would not comment.

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