

'Helitack' Units—

Hickel Lauds Native Firefighters

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA—Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel spent last week inspecting the new "helitack" firefighting units in various parts of the State.

He was accompanied by Burt Silcock state director of the Bureau of Land Management and Jim Richardson BLM's state fire control officer.

The "helitack" idea was developed by Sec. Hickel and Silcock last year during the Swanson River fire on the Kenai Peninsula.

"The idea," explained the Secretary, "is to put together a fire department before a fire starts, instead of chasing after men and equipment once you already have a disaster on your hands."

The Secretary observed a simulated "helitack" operation in McGrath and then went on to view a temporary field station at Minchumina and the district headquarters in Fairbanks.

BLM, which is responsible for 220 million acres of fire-prone land in Alaska has trained a total of 900 firefighters already this year. The crews are made up of Alaskan Native recruits who have long been known for their effectiveness in fighting forest fires.

The new mobility has been provided by the large 205A-1 helicopters, which carry a team of 13 men and equipment.

This mobility, combined with the jet and computer system for spotting fires has made a marked difference in fire control efforts.

Jim Richardson explained that even though Alaska's exceptionally dry spring has produced more fires this year than last (301 this year in comparison to 289 last year) only 9000 acres have burned in dramatic contrast to over 500,000 last year at this time.

Secretary Hickel chatted at length with the Native crews.

"I'm impressed by the spirit of these men," he said afterwards. "They are competent and they are proud of it."

This year 95 per cent of the fires have been started by careless people, according to Silcock. The only answer, he declared, is a vast educational effort to enlist the public's help to prevent fires from starting.