

# BLM promises faster conveyances

BY MARGIE BAUMAN

Bureau of Land Management officials reorganizing the Alaska state office to speed interim land conveyances are hoping that the move will also create an atmosphere of trust with the Native community.

"We want to set up a process that will make two-way communications a lot easier, but we're not sure just what it will be at this point," said Robert W. Armdorfer, BLM's chief of technical services and acting assistant to the state director during the reorganization.

"We're not doing this as a public relations process, but as an information and dissemination process," he said. "We want to build an atmosphere of trust with the Natives."

Armdorfer said there was a tendency of the BLM staff to "wallow in paper on any adjudication process," and that he hoped this would change. "We want to get our staff and the

Native decision makers together, so we can get on with it (the interim conveyances)," he said.

Of the 1.3 million acres so far identified as ready for interim conveyance, 700,000 acres are on appeal, Armdorfer said. As soon as an appeal is filed, jurisdiction goes to the Alaska Native Claims Appeals Board, until the decision is made.

"We hope to at least eliminate the Native appeals by the improved communications process," Armdorfer said. "Our people will negotiate before it gets into the public appeals process. If there are conflicts that can't be reconciled, we'll make two conveyances and send (only) the disputed part on for appeal."

In addition, Armdorfer said correspondence from the BLM would now include names and phone numbers on whom to call with any questions regarding that correspondence, "so we can try and resolve some problems on the spot."

"We have a very positive out-

look on this (reorganization) and are optimistic that it will do some good. We hope that the Natives will view it the same way," he said.

From the time easement regulations are finalized, without further changes, BLM's goal is to complete 80 percent of the village land entitlement paperwork within three years, 90 percent within five years.

Much depends on when those final regulations are issued. Mostly, our hang-up is lack of easement decisions," Armdorfer said. With the final regulations in hand, the BLM hopes to speed the paperwork, particularly as it applies to getting comments on decisions back from rural areas.

## Move to Accelerate Land Transfers

The decision to reorganize the BLM to speed land transfers initiated last summer, when Assistant Interior Secretary Guy Martin asked that the land conveyance process under the land

claims legislation be examined.

The BLM said major problems were lack of policy in certain areas, imbalance in staffing between easement identification and adjudication, high turnover rate and inefficiencies within the BLM.

In a report prepared for presentation to Alaska Federation of Natives Land Managers Friday, Armdorfer talked about the importance of an attitude which will make the BLM policy work effectively.

"We will begin implementation of this policy immediately," he said. "One of the techniques which we believe will be most effective involves personal visits by our staff. We think that once BLM staff and the Natives begin face to face discussion, most of the problems will disappear. Our staff will have authority to negotiate and come to agreement on matters within the state director's discretionary authority."

"We also plan to establish a land information system to provide more information about the conveyance process and to provide an avenue for problems to be recognized and resolved."

"Details are not firm, but the system will involve radio, TV and telephone as well as publications," he said.

Armdorfer said the possibility

of a toll free Zenith telephone number would also be considered, so that land managers and others with questions could call the BLM and get quick responses to their questions.

## Potential Bottleneck Resolved

Meanwhile the BLM has already taken some action to speed some of the paperwork.

"The potential bottleneck due to a lack of easement identification staff was solved by transferring the basic responsibility for this task to the two district offices," Armdorfer said. "The state office staff has been working on the backlog and will be current very soon."

"Preliminary easement identification has been done on 30 million acres with final recommendations complete on 15 million acres. These easements will have to be conformed to the new regulations, but we do not anticipate a delay in the conveyance process."

Staff expansion is also planned to speed the conveyances. The reorganized department will have a total of 66 employees, including 15 new positions. A training section has been established and as vacancies on the adjudication staff occur, these trainees will be transferred so that a minimum loss of production will occur," Armdorfer said.