

Crew Still Hot About BLM Fire Policy

By JEFFREY R. RICHARDSON

Although Alaska's wildfires are all but out, Native firefighters are still hot about what they feel are discriminatory employment practices and attitudes of the Bureau of Land Management.

On August 30, firefighters Gordon Riley and Audrey Gjesdal, in separate letters, attacked the bureau for hiring 250 firefighters from the State of Idaho while three to five Native crews based in Fairbanks went begging for work during the hot, smoky summer.

Not long after the letters were written, Riley's 16-person crew was dispatched to one of Alaska's numerous fires. Several BLM sector bosses, most from outside Alaska, have filed derogatory reports on the performance of Riley's crew; at least one recommended they not be rehired.

Riley insists that the sector bosses are unfairly basing their judgments of the whole crew on the poor performance of two members. In addition, although BLM asserts that the 171 firefighters hired through the Boise Interagency Fire Center were much more extensively trained than regular firefighters, Riley suggests that such training should be much more available to Alaska Natives.

The most favorable assessment of Riley's crew came from Sector Boss Chris Pankam of California. Although he faulted the crew for lack of training and organization, he continued, "The crew did work very hard and exceeded my expectations. The quality of work was good and with more experience they might be more organized and work better as a crew. They are not poor workers."

Although BLM's Fairbanks District Office refused to part with copies of the evaluations, a member of Riley's crew was permitted to hand copy portions of the comments. Not all the comments were as favorable as Pankam's. Another Californian, Tom Avent, wrote:

"It was obvious to me several crew members had come to this fire with a hangover from drugs or alcohol."

Another sector boss who observed Riley's crew on the same blaze, Terry Anderson, fumed not only at the crew, but those who had hired them:

"I wish the bureaucrats who hired this crew had been on this fire the first two days and witnessed the two crew members wrenching in convulsions. This was a hot fire, not a picnic area and to hire winos and junkies and send them out to this fire unrequested was a mistake. Again, most of the crew did a good job but the state of two of them plus the political overtones in this crew's hiring caused some tense situations."

Riley himself is a little tense about the charges of lack of experience and organization and suggested because of his letter writing that his crew was singled out for scrutiny.

"They say things that we didn't even do. They were checking us out, there were different sector bosses every day," Riley said.

Riley explained that his Fairbanks crew was made up of men and women from several villages who call the Interior City home. He conceded that two crew members were in poor shape but denied that they hampered the overall performance of the crew.

Fairbanks District Manager for BLM, Richard LeDosquet, told the Tundra Times he was unaware of a request to respond to Riley's original letter but promised to look into the matter. However, he defended BLM's past efforts to train Natives for more specialized jobs such as smokejumping and logistics dispatching.

"We have really made numerous attempts to get training to Native peoples, at all levels of the operation. We'll get people trained to a point and they don't stay with us. We have a few people who return

Firefighters . . .

(Continued from page 1)

year after year. We'd welcome that absolutely, that's the way to go. I appreciate that better jobs come along and firefighting is seasonal," he said.

LeDosquet said BLM "couldn't do the job" without Native crews and said in general their performance was "super outstanding."

He acknowledged that difficulties sometimes arise between crews and their supervisors, but he suggested that they are not widespread.

In reference to the need for crews to be well organized internally, LeDosquet commented, "It makes all the difference in the world."

According to Riley, five of the crew members had never received fire training or been out on assignment. The remainder had two to twelve seasons of experience under their belts and received BLM's modest week-long "hot shot" crew training held each May in various villages around the state.

Riley questions BLM's rather bookish attitude toward fire training and boasted that one member of his crew who had no training and no experience, an Indian from Louisiana, picked up the pace very well.

"He did good too, he watched us and picked it up after a couple of days," Riley said.

Although BLM State Director Curt McVee hinted in a response to Riley's August 30 letter that his agency was thinking of stepping up the training of Alaska Natives for more specialized firefighting positions, Riley is not complacent. He said his crew plans to travel to Anchorage during the Alaska Federation of Natives convention early in November and enter the state BLM office en masse to file applications for many of the positions they feel should be available to Natives next season.

"They keep on hassling us, we'll keep on hassling them, in a legal way," Riley concluded.