

BLM responds to fire policy charges

The Bureau of Land Management is "not in the practice of picking up organized crews in Fairbanks" to fight Interior fires because they tend to be less experienced and less cohesive, according to Fire Control Boss Jerry Timmons.

Timmons commented on a story in last week's Tundra Times indicating that a Fairbanks crew headed by Gordon Riley was unhappy with evaluations of its performance by supervisory personnel.

"We have tried Fairbanks crews and we have had problems relative to village crews we get in the villages," he said.

Riley alleged that BLM sector bosses made derogatory remarks about his crew that were based on the poor behavior of only two crew members. Riley's crew was dispatched to a fire in early September after protesting to BLM State Director Curt McVee that the agency had hired 250 out-of-state firefighters. McVee asserted that 171 specialized workers were ordered to Alaska because their skills were in short supply.

According to several critiques of Riley's crew, sector bosses (who supervise several crews at once) resented the fact that the Fairbanks group was dispatched at a time when their services were not in high demand because the end of the season was approaching.

"I'll admit they were pushed into the field," Timmons said. He added there seemed to be increased difficulty this year between Native crews and supervisors because of Native resentment over the attitude of the Bureau of Land Management in conveying land to Native corporations under the land claims act.

Timmons explained that more than 100 persons from the Fairbanks area were dispatched to fires through the local state employment office, a procedure the BLM is legally required to follow.

Responding to Riley's criticism that BLM should provide more training for Native people for more advanced or specialized positions, Timmons said some Native people prefer to stay on crews instead of advancing to

leadership positions because the pay is better or seek other jobs for the same reason.

However, Timmons acknowledged that it may be time to step up the training of Native fire specialists now that Alaska has passed from the lucrative pipeline age, an era that attracted many Native people away from firefighting.
