

Babbitt says solve subsistence first

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Interior Secretary says he must move quickly

By Jeff Richardson

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt told the *Tundra Times* in Dillingham last week that resolving the subsistence issue should be his top priority. Emerging from private consultations with the Alaska Federation of Natives for an informal press conference with reporters excluded from the session, Babbitt said:

"I think I have an obligation under federal law to simply guarantee that the rural residents of this state, including the Natives, have a right to subsistence hunting and fishing. Now, we had originally hoped that it could all be worked out under the leadership of the state government. It doesn't appear that, at least in the short run, that's going to be possible. And I think that imposes an obligation on me under federal law, to work out and work toward a more comprehensive system of subsistence regulation. It's complicated, but that doesn't mean it has to take forever. I've got an obligation to act expeditiously."

When asked by the *Tundra Times* which of the many Alaskan issues confronting his department he felt should be a priority, Babbitt responded, "I think the subsistence issue, because it is an issue of life and livelihood, is certainly the most urgent. There are lots of other issues, certainly . . . but the subsistence issue is one that I think is coming at us from every angle pretty incessantly."

Babbitt supports buybacks

Babbitt's remarks came about halfway through an official three-

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Babbitt and Deer Expedition

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Subsistence first

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Lunch with Babbitt
Dialogue with Deer

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What Next?

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ada Deer are welcomed by Togiak residents as they arrive for consultations with local leaders. For more on the Babbitt, please turn to page 6.

Photo by Jeff Richardson



Ada Deer leaves the Togiak Traditional Council office for a tour of the village.

Babbitt and Deer Expedition

A Special *Tundra Times* Report
~ Part I ~



Participants in AFN's Leadership Retreat in Dillingham attend dinner honoring Babbitt and Deer.

Babbitt, Deer meet Natives . . .

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week tour of Alaska, more than half of which is federally owned. He has been accompanied for much of the trip by Ada Deer, the new assistant secretary for Indian affairs. Although he has announced few specific policy decisions beyond a commitment to listen well and work hard, Babbitt has made clear his position on a number of issues of critical concern to Natives:

— He supports a buyback of federal offshore oil leases in Bristol Bay;

— He supports a buyout of Native-owned lands in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge to protect important brown bear habitat and honor the economic imperatives of Native corporations;

— Babbitt sees no need to reorganize the Bureau of Indian Affairs, telling reporters in Dillingham:

"Every administration that comes in starts off with a gigantic reorganization. And I've got to tell you that I think all too often reorganizations are kind of make-work, they're busy work. If you don't have a policy, you go out and rearrange all the boxes on paper," said Babbitt. "So I guess my own view is that you hire good

people and set out and do the task and the organization will follow. But it's not the primary issue."

Subsistence appointments

One concrete decision announced by Babbitt in Dillingham was appointment of 84 Alaskans to serve on regional subsistence advisory councils as mandated by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) passed in 1980. In remarks to participants in the Alaska Federation of Natives leadership retreat, Babbitt chided his predecessors for not making the appointments sooner.

A prepared statement issued by the Dept. of the Interior quoted Babbitt as saying that the councils "are a very vital part of our efforts to make sure rural Alaskans have continued opportunity for subsistence activities on federal public land in the state."

When the Alaska Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a state law mandating rural preference for fish and game resources, which was intended to fulfill the requirements of ANILCA, the federal government took over fish and game management on its own lands.

Ada Deer on Sovereignty
Although an avowed advocate

of Native tribal sovereignty, Babbitt has talked much less on that subject than on a host of natural resource issues. However, consultations held in Fairbanks between Assistant Secretary Deer and the Alaska Inter Tribal Council (AITC), a group advocating Alaskan tribal sovereignty, produced more direct and positive statements.

According to AITC spokesperson Dale Sambo, lengthy memos written by Deer — who's only been in office since last month — for Babbitt's consideration, as well as remarks she made in Fairbanks, have been heartening to sovereignty advocates.

"Ada Deer supports the position of AITC," said Sambo.

In Dillingham, Deer put her job as head of Indian affairs in the broader perspective of the Interior Department, telling nearly 100 Native participants in an AFN leadership retreat:

"I am an activist, I am an advocate and when Secretary Babbitt interviewed me in early January, I mentioned this to him and he said, 'Good, that's what we want.' And I appreciate that. He is known for his sensitivity, caring and concern for Native issues."

Deer recounted being told by a

I am an activist, I am an advocate and when Secretary Babbitt interviewed me in early January, I mentioned this to him and he said, 'Good, that's what we want.'

— **Ada Deer**

White House staffer that when Babbitt met with the domestic policy council, he spoke of "Indians, Indians, Indians." So, he's carrying the good word at various levels of government," Deer said.

One promise fulfilled, others to come?

The Babbitt trip fulfills a commitment he made to former Alaska Governor Bill Sheffield at the time of his selection by President Clinton to head the Interior Department. His itinerary has included Kaktovik, Prudhoe Bay, Arctic Village, Fairbanks, Kotzebue, the Red Dog Mine, Kodiak, Anchorage, Valdez and southeast Alaska.

U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens, also in Dillingham to conduct hearings on reauthorization of the Magnuson fisheries act, told the *Tundra Times* he was pleased with

Babbitt's visit.

"I think that Secretary Babbitt has kept his commitment. He agreed when we first met to come up and spend some time in Alaska. He's done that now," said Stevens. "I think he's had a broad range of experiences and he certainly has a lot of problems on his plate. None of them are easy and none of them are going to come out exactly in terms of final decision as anyone wants."

Native response to Babbitt's visit has generally been favorable, if guarded. In comments to AFN meeting participants at a dinner honoring Babbitt and Deer, State Sen. Georgianna Lincoln said: "The words that I heard today were most rewarding to me, yet sometimes we hear things and get disappointed. We'll see what comes from Washington, D.C."