

# BLM Organic Act may help subsistence issue

By DENNIS JOHNSON

What is the future of the Bureau of Land Management

in Alaska? A BLM report prepared earlier this year suggested that if the agency loses control over much of the land that it now manages in Alaska when Congress creates new federal parks and refuges, the bureau should consider getting out of land management altogether in Alaska.

And yet, only last fall, Congress gave BLM the authority to vastly improve its management of generally unclassified public domain.

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act, more commonly known as the BLM Organic Act, has finally given the agency what it has been seeking for ten years--the authority to manage and control public lands. No longer is the BLM treading troubled waters trying to figure out where its authority ends and the authority of the U.S. Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service begins.

No longer is BLM an agency whose sole purpose is to sell or give away lands.

Although the Organic Act became a law without much fanfare last fall, it may be a very important law in Alaska, where most of the federal land is still essentially unclassified, that is, not set aside in parks and refuges.

Traditionally the Bureau of Land Management has had the job of holding federal land until someone decided there was something better for the land than letting cattle herds and off-the-road vehicles tear up or eat up the landscape. BLM has been the agency to see for free land for min-

ing, grazing, or farming.

The 50-page Organic Act changes all that. Congress decided that there are certain lands now controlled by BLM which need to be better managed and protected for the future. These lands do not necessarily match the management goals of the other federal land agencies. So congress directed BLM to more actively and more comprehensively manage these lands.

One of the most significant sections of the new law is that it brings BLM under the 1964 Wilderness Act. This means now BLM has the authority to study lands that it manages to determine if it should be set aside permanently as wilderness.

The potential here to prevent further land development is enormous. The BLM could, in effect, recommend that several roadless areas greater than 5,000 acres throughout the state be set aside as wilderness. If those lands have been used traditionally for subsistence hunting, such hunting could continue. But if a large mineral deposit was discovered mining would not be allowed until the

Secretary of the Interior decided to classify the land.

In a recent interview, State BLM Director Curt McVee admitted that there may be conflicts between what Natives want done with the land and how his office decides to classify public domain. However, he suggested that BLM and Native groups, who have fought bitterly for years over implementation of the land claims act, may now have more in common than they have ever had in the past.

"The Organic Act may help the subsistence issue more than people may realize. Before, when public lands were opened to homesteading, there were almost no constraints where people could settle. We couldn't say no to homesteaders if they wanted to take land in the middle of a subsistence area. But now, under the Organic Act, that won't happen. Hopefully we will know where the subsistence lands are through land inventories," McVee explained.

In the end, land classification by the bureau will depend on many things: village dependency on lands for subsistence, the discovery of oil or mineral and existing land ownership patterns.

Another issue complicating land use decisions is whether it will be economically feasible to develop isolated tracts of land.

For example, McVee said, "There is a volume of timber in the Yukon-Kuskokwim River that has a certain amount of value, but that value depends on the cost of transporting and processing the timber into lumber."

# BLM Management ...

(Continued from page 4)

As the BLM gradually begins to exert its new management authority, multiple land ownership is a big factor that will complicate the management picture. McVee suggested there is a large potential for a number of problems and the interests who get what they want will be those with the biggest piece of the land pie, or the most desirable.

"There will have to be a lot of cooperative planning. We won't just be planning for public land, but rather for a mixture of agencies and land owners. What we will have to do is come up with a cooperative land use plan compatible to all. I think that is the only approach that will work."

And that, according to BLM spokesman Kerry Cartier, may bring the BLM and Natives closer together than ever before, "I think the two groups may have more common problems than they think in regards to land development and subsistence."

McVee suspects there may be some trade-offs between his agency and the Native corporation in deciding how land should be used.

Under the Organic Act, BLM will not be the only body making decisions. Congress itself left the power to intercede in sales of federal lands, withdrawals or major land use changes.

"The role of Congress has been retained in the Act, including

the right to veto," McVee said.

Although based on the principals of multiple land use and sustained yield from the resources of the land, the Organic Act still gives the Interior Secretary authority to eliminate major existing land uses or classifications on federal lands.

From the start, the act clearly excludes lands selected by Natives, but not yet conveyed to them. It also excludes lands on the Outer Continental Shelf.

The key to more comprehensive management of land by the BLM is the development and implementation of land use plans, based on information obtained in the land inventories. These inventories, which will be detailed reports of current land use, resources, etc., have not yet started and are not expected to until next year at the earliest.

Even so, the bureau has held a series of land use hearings in ten communities throughout the State: Bethel, Tok, Galena, Barrow, McGrath, Glennallen, Nome Delta, Ft. Yukon

and Fairbanks.

Right now, many questions about the Organic Act remain to be answered. Like everyone else, BLM must wait and see what Congress decides to do with the federal land in Alaska not selected by the Natives or the state, or set aside in parks and refuges already. It may take years for the BLM to organize itself as a truly management-oriented agency. Still, the agency seems ready to make a beginning.

"We have finally gotten what we always wanted, now all we have to do is go about implementing it," Cartier said.