

BLM under fire at meet

by Jeffrey R. Richardson
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"Basically, it's all in the courts right now." This was how Gus Sorensen, from the Anchorage District office of the Bureau of Land Management described the issue of easements across Native lands.

Speaking at a planning seminar in Cordova, Sorensen and Native Liaison officer Lloyd Sutton had few encouraging words for representatives of the five Chugach villages Eyak, Tatitlek, Port Graham, English Bay, and Chenega.

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Easements center of controversy

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Sorensen and Sutton fielded hard questioning and some criticism for BLM's easement policies.

Many people expressed concern over trespass problems that may arise from easements. Representatives of Port Graham suggested that deciding who is to blame for death or injury that occurs within an easement is a problem they may face in their area.

Another problem is that BLM does not make on-site inspections of easement proposals to determine if a trail, road or a site is actually being used. In the case of trails, BLM has relied on villagers' testimony. However, one Eyak man, Bill Barnes, complained, "They don't take our word for it when we tell them."

He said a lot of the easements proposed for the Eyak selection were animal trails. "A lot of these trails were only used by a bear and a rabbit." He added that in one area they had four or five easements going to one lake.

In spite of Eyak's objections, the Land Use Planning Commission has recommended that most of the easements be left intact.

Sutton acknowledged that BLM had been inconsistent in developing easement policy and said it was the responsibility of those agencies or parties requesting easements to prove that they are necessary.

However, the anti-easement feeling seems to run deeper than legal technicalities. One listener pointed out that even when Natives get title to what is supposed to be their land, "somebody's still got jurisdiction over us."