

Soviet ministry grants approval for U.S. flights

It's really official this time

by Holly F. Reimer
Tundra Times reporter

The Soviet Ministry of Civil Aviation formally granted permission recently for Alaska commercial aircraft to fly into Soviet Far East airspace without a Soviet navigator onboard.

The official document allowed Bering Air, a charter serviced located in Nome, to resume its flights to the Soviet Far East immediately. The flights had been halted most recently in January.

Bering Air has been the vanguard of negotiations between Soviet officials — mainly the military making strict regulations — and an array of American officials who were trying to convince the Soviets to abolish the Soviet navigator requirement.

Although reasons the Soviets gave for having their navigators onboard are valid, a spokesman from the Alaska Office of International Trade in Anchorage said Bering Air had proven

through experience that the assistance of a Soviet navigator was not necessary.

Ron Miller, specialist at the trade office, said the initial reason the Soviets wanted their own navigator onboard was because Alaska Federal Aviation Administration officials had deemed the Provideniya airport to be unsafe. Then, he said, the Soviet military became concerned about aircraft accidentally being shot down in Soviet airspace as a Korean Air Liner had been several years ago.

"So they primarily wanted a Soviet navigator as an interpreter," Miller explained.

Miller and Alaska officials are confident that Bering Air and its passengers will not be shot down nor do they believe a Soviet navigator is necessary. That is why they have put such a tremendous amount of effort toward negotiating with the Soviets to get the accord.

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Right now Jim Rowe, president of Bering Air, and his crew are learning to speak Russian, and the air traffic controller at Provideniya already speaks English.

"He's flown in there so many times and he has the ability to fly in there in any condition," Miller said.

The Soviets wanted one of their own navigators, while Alaskans were saying there was no need. Everyone involved wanted the issue finally put to rest.

Since late last year the Soviets more than once have given Rowe the go-ahead to fly into Soviet airspace without a Soviet navigator onboard. The Soviets also told him more than once that he could not fly into Soviet airspace without one of their navigators onboard.

Rowe explained this time he took the Soviets verbal waiver with a grain of salt because it was only verbal and he wanted to see the official document.

Rowe said after months of negotia-

tions with the Soviets the curtain was slowly starting to rise.

"Things were looking real positive, and they had given us some verbal indication that they may sign the papers," he said.

But, even so, Rowe kept his composure and waited until he had the official documents in his hands.

"I was surprised and very excited for this to happen," Rowe told the *Tundra Times* last week.

The accord designates passage between Anchorage, Nome, Gambell and King Island and the Far East communities of Provideniya, Magadan, Anadyr and Khabarovsk.

Miller, from the trade office, said the State Department played one of the biggest roles working with the Soviets. He said the federal officials were trying to convince the Soviets that Rowe didn't in fact need the Soviet navigator.

"It's difficult to say — why the Soviets changed their minds — without knowing what went on behind the scenes," Miller said.

Miller said people in Magadan were

also against the requirement and were trying from their side to get a formal agreement.

Business-wise Rowe isn't looking at this accord as only another way to make money. He said there are underlying reasons which are of greater importance.

"They're important because of the way we feel about Soviet relations and the way it involves people of that region," he said about the cultural ties between Natives.

"The border opening was intended for them."

Right now Natives from the Seward Peninsula area can fly to the Soviet Far East without a visa upon the invitation of Native friends or relatives from the other side of the strait.

Miller said another positive impact from the flights being re-established is to show the importance of Alaska to the rest of the United States as a connection to the Soviet Union.

"Where else in the United States can you fly 20 minutes and be in the Soviet Union?" Miller asked.