Announces initiatives in rural energy, subsistence management, land conveyance

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ANCHORAGE, Alaska – As part of President Obama's commitment to help Alaska Native leaders build strong, prosperous and resilient communities, Deputy Secretary of the Interior Mike Connor today announced that Interior is launching initiatives to streamline Native land conveyances, improve rural energy development and provide greater local participation in the management of subsistence fish and wildlife resources on federal lands.

"Our goal is to work with Alaska Native leaders to address issues of vital importance to their communities," Connor told the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Anchorage. "We are prioritizing remaining Native land conveyances, expanding local participation in the decision making process for resource management on federal lands and changing regulations to permit the Federal Subsistence Board to use more flexible criteria to better meet the subsistence needs of Alaska residents."

Connor also announced that Interior is providing an additional $300,000 in direct funding to the Remote Community Renewable Energy (RCRE) partnership to accelerate development of a renewable-diesel hybrid energy system designed to provide cheaper and cleaner energy to remote communities such as Alaskan native villages, and another $100,000 to related work advancing the capabilities of this hybrid energy technology. The RCRE initiative is led by the Department of Energy's National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and Colorado University, in collaboration with native Alaskans, other Federal agencies including the State Department and other stakeholders. The RCRE partnership commenced work in 2013 with an initial $300,000 grant from the Interior Department.

"This additional funding will help to stand up this exciting new hybrid energy module system that could allow Alaskan villages to replace up to 75 percent of their diesel fuel with renewable energy," Connor said. "Our hope is that this project will make a real difference for rural villages that are paying extremely high costs for heating and electricity."

The project under development is a modular, scalable control and communication system designed to allow any micro grid component, such as a wind turbine, solar panel, diesel generator and/or energy storage device, to plug-in and contribute to the micro grid.

Earlier in his Alaska visit, Connor signed the final patent for the transfer of 10,170 acres of surface estate to Nunamiut Corporation, which represents the village of Anaktuvuk Pass, satisfying the remaining land entitlement to that community under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. With this final patent, Anaktuvuk Pass will have received 92,160 acres. Additional acreage was also transferred to the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation at that signing ceremony.

“96 percent of the land entitlements have been conveyed to Alaska Natives, and we are prioritizing remaining Native land conveyances and patenting to reach 100 percent,” Connor said. “The BLM hopes to complete virtually all Native land conveyances within the next 5-8 years to fulfill this important promise.”

Nearly 44 million acres of the 45.7 million acres of Native land entitlements under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act have been conveyed to Alaska Native corporations over the past 40 years, Connor noted. All but 10 million acres of those conveyances have received final patent. Most of the remaining lands have been surveyed but need survey plats and final patent confirmation. Final entitlement has been met for 99 villages with 135 remaining requiring closure.

In response to concerns of Alaska Native leaders, Interior will also change the rural/non-rural determination process for the fish and wildlife subsistence program on federal lands. When implemented through regulations, the new process will enable the Federal Subsistence Board to use more flexible criteria to designate rural communities, better meeting the subsistence needs of Alaska Native and rural communities that rely on hunting and fishing for sustenance and the maintenance of cultural traditions.

The federal government assumed management of subsistence wildlife resources on federal lands in Alaska 1992 and the fish resources on certain state waters in 1998 when the State of Alaska could not comply with the subsistence priority provisions of Title VIII of Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). The new initiative follows earlier actions by Interior and the Federal Subsistence Board that added two additional public members representing subsistence users and named a new Board chairman. Deference to the regional advisory councils in the regulation process was also expanded.

Connor also said Interior agencies have been tasked to develop a proposal for a demonstration project to provide enhanced participation of local people and subsistence users in the decision making process for resource management on federal lands.

“The Alaska Federation of Natives and other Native groups have long sought more cooperation in the management of federal lands, especially in the case of subsistence management,” Connor said. “And Secretary Jewell has also recommended that more use be made of cooperative agreements with local tribes and other entities. We want to work with Native communities on developing a project that might be utilized on a wider basis in the future.”

The Alaska Federation of Natives is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 151 federally-recognized tribes, 134 village corporations, 12 regional corporations and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and compact to run federal and state programs.
