Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce today announced that American Airlines will purchase 20,000 blankets manufactured from the wool of Navajo Indian sheep.

The blankets, made similar to the famed trade cloth imported from England, will bear three-inch square label showing their origin and will be attested to by both Commissioner Bruce, a Mohawk-Sioux Indian, and Peter MacDonald, Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council.

That American Airlines passengers can huddle in the same material as Indians is the culmination of considerable effort on the part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Commissioner Bruce pointed out.

"The story really began in 1971, when the general wool market throughout the United States was the worst since the 1930's," the Commissioner explained. "Navajo wool, in particular, found no market. This hit the Navajo Indian Reservation hard, since 75 percent of all Navajos, whose reservation is the size of West Virginia, raise sheep."

A Bureau of Indian Affairs industrial development specialist, Irving Schwartz, was told to find a foreign or domestic outlet for the wool. Schwartz searched diligently, but nothing- appeared to happen until he consulted a wool expert from New Mexico State University and found that Indian wool -- despite an undeserved faulty reputation -- really was high grade wool. Its rating- had come about because poor grades of wool were dumped with good grades and strong winds had permeated it with dirt and weeds.

Schwartz then called for help from the Wool Manufacturers Association of America. When asked whose wool did sell and why, that organization indicated that New Zealand wool found the best market because it was well-graded and packaged.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs then signed a contract Growers Warehouse, Inc., Casper, Wyoming, to bring equipment onto the Navajo Reservation to grade and bale Navajo wool and to teach Navajos to do their own grading and baling. A Denver laboratory was asked to certify the grading.

The result was that the Navajos began to get three to four times more money for their wool than they had previously been offered.

The Bureau is industrial development specialist then negotiated with Faribault Woolen Mill Co., Faribault, Minnesota, to make trade cloth. Trade cloth traditionally has a bright hard finish and rainbow stripes along the selvage (each edge of piece goods). Used by Indians as clothing and blankets, it has always been imported from England, never produced in this country. Purchased by Indians since the earliest days of Indian-white relationships, the earliest versions are in museums.

It was again Irving Schwartz who showed samples of the Faribault Indian wool cloth to the airlines and made the sale, Commissioner Bruce said.

Delivery of the blankets to American Airlines began June 1.