Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Ada E. Deer expresses concern about the well-being of the Indian people who are directly affected by the inclement weather in the northern part of the country.

"Eight federally recognized Indian tribes and approximately 56,000 Indian people have been adversely affected by the recent disastrous weather in South Dakota," Ms. Deer said.

The Dakotas have been hit by freezing temperatures and record snowfall. Snow has drifted to as high as 15 feet in some areas closing all roads and stranding people in remote areas. "Mercifully, there has been only one reported Indian death as a result of this bad weather." Mr. Delbert Brewer, Area Director for the Aberdeen Area Office said.

The Bureau of lndian Affairs has been working around the clock to respond to this emergency. The Aberdeen Area Director has established a Disaster Team to respond to this crisis which is operating 24 hours a day to coordinate and direct BIA' s efforts to assist tribes within their jurisdiction. In addition, a field coordinator has been dispatched to Pierre, South Dakota to directly assist in the coordination of the efforts of the State, National Guard and FEMA.

"Our crews are working 24 hours a day in two shifts in an attempt to open roads on the reservations to get food and water in," Mr. Brewer said. "At this juncture the main objective is to ensure that the basic needs of the people are met." In order to respond to this crisis, snow blowers were shipped in from the Billings Area Office. However, the Aberdeen Area is now experiencing difficulty getting adequate fuel for equipment, and keeping them maintained. Extra costs for supplies and labor that are being incurred by Aberdeen and other Area Offices as a result of this storm is causing havoc with current operating budgets, but the BIA remains committed to assist tribal governments during this crisis.

Wind chill factors of -70 degrees below zero have not helped the ground efforts in Aberdeen. Snow blowers were directed to free those in need of medical attention first, but in some cases the critically ill had to be air lifted by National Guard helicopters to local hospitals. The BIA has established shelters close to emergency care units for those that require ongoing medical attention.

BIA, Area Offices in storm affected regions are working directly with tribal, state and federal agencies to respond to the needs of the Indian community caused by this disaster.