Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Commissioner of Indian Affairs Glenn L. Emmons announced today that he has instructed the Indian Bureau's area office at Billings, Montana, to withhold approval of additional sales of restricted Indian lands on the Crow Reservation in Montana that violate limitations imposed by the Act of June 4, 1920 (41 Stat. 751).

In conformance with this Act the Commissioner is requesting the potential buyer to certify that he owns less than 1,280 acres of rangeland or 640 acres of agricultural land on the reservation, and that he will not own more than 1,920 acres of rangeland or 1,200 acres of agricultural land on the reservation if the transaction is completed.

Commissioner Emmons stated that approximately 60 days ago he had been advised by John M. Cooper, the Bureau's area director at Billings, that there may have been violations of the 1920 statute prohibiting any single owner from acquiring more land on the Crow Reservation than the acreages indicated.

Following receipt of this report the Commissioner immediately suspended all land sales at Crow Reservation and ordered a full investigation. The investigation has now been completed and shows that the 1920 law has apparently been violated in a substantial number of cases.

The violations occurred as early as the 1S'20's and were continued through the 1930's and 1940's to the present time. In some cases they resulted from sales of land by non-Indian owners who had previously acquired tracts of Indian land on the reservation. In other instances they were the result of direct sales by Indians who received fee patents either by congressional enactment or administrative action. In still further cases they came about through Government-supervised sales made at the request of Indian owners.

The investigation indicates that apparently the violations occurred unintentionally. Many persons stated that they were aware of the 1920 statutory limitations but had been certain for years that these limitations were no longer effective since they were removed by subsequent acts of Congress. Explaining that the Bureau of Indian Affairs is governed by literally thousands of statutes which have never been fully codified, Commissioner Emmons stated that an exhaustive study has thus far not revealed any such amendment.

As a result, the Commissioner is now ordering Bureau personnel in the Billings area to observe strictly the 1920 act restrictions in all future sales over which the Bureau has any control, Mr. Emmons also cautions all persons buying Crow land in private sales and all title companies involved in Crow transactions to check carefully for possible violations of the 1920 statute.

Commissioner Emmons said that his instructions will remain in effect until someone can produce proof that the 1920 act has been amended as alleged or unless Congress should decide in the future to remove the limitations.