BLM To Dramatically Speed Up Completion of Alaska Statehood Land Transfer

Using GPS-technology will allow agency to cut time and cost in half, and increase quality of land surveys

ANCHORAGE, Alaska – The Bureau of Land Management today took the first steps toward dramatically accelerating the rate at which it transfers Federal lands to the State of Alaska. The agency will now use satellite-based navigation—a more advanced form of the technology that drives many smartphone applications—to help mark, define, and establish the boundaries of State lands. This innovation will fulfill the promise of the Alaska Statehood Act in half the time, save $60 million or more for the American taxpayer, and bring major new economic development opportunities to the state.

When it became a state in 1959, Alaska was guaranteed more than 100 million acres of land within the state's boundaries. After nearly 60 years since statehood, roughly 40 percent of the land transfer remains unfinished. Completing the job using traditional methods, which have been largely unchanged since 1963, is projected to take at least two decades and cost taxpayers more than $120 million.

"Fulfilling the obligations of the Alaska Statehood Act is a priority for me and for the Bureau," said Director Neil Kornze. "I asked the BLM team in Alaska if we could come up with a more efficient way to complete the land transfers that are owed to the state. The innovations the team brought forward—that we're implementing today—ensure that the BLM is surveying land in ways that are faster, more accurate, and more cost-effective. This is the kind of smart innovation people expect and deserve from their government agencies."

The BLM expects to cut the time and cost of the program in half. Using this updated approach will allow the BLM to complete the remaining land surveys in 10 years or less, provide the state with higher quality information, and save taxpayers $60 million or more, and it will give the State of Alaska major new economic opportunities in the process.

Surveying land in Alaska, using the traditional method, involves flying small teams out to the field for weeks at a time to haul gear and cut lines through the bush, dig holes in the frozen tundra, and set metal cylinders—called monuments—into the ground at regular intervals, usually every two miles. Millions of dollars are spent each year to complete this survey work. And despite the placement of physical markers in the ground, many monuments shift significantly or are lost due to seasonal freeze and thaw, fire, or other natural causes. Others are lost due to destruction by animals or theft by humans.

In 2013, the BLM successfully tested a more modern land survey method that uses an advanced form of the Global Positioning System. The new approach, which is called Direct Point Position Survey (DPPS), uses satellites and terrestrial relay stations to pinpoint key locations on the ground. Using this widely available technology will allow the BLM to replace most, but not all, of the physical monuments that are normally placed by survey teams in the backcountry. For instance, instead of placing 225 physical monuments in a 30-township plot, the BLM will now need to place only 40 monuments, a reduction of more than 80 percent.

The DPPS land survey will also bring significant cost savings to the State of Alaska, especially for future surveys and land management. The use of precise GPS coordinates eliminates the need for and the cost associated with sending teams into the bush to find, maintain, and replace monuments that often go missing. The new approach will also simplify any resurveying that might be done in the future, particularly because the DPPS data is higher quality than traditional field information.

The BLM's modern survey method is tied to the National Spatial Reference System, an extremely reliable national coordinate system that defines latitude, longitude, and heights throughout the United States. This well-established system has been used as a foundation for mapping and charting, state boundaries, and major engineering projects. Its reliability and precision for many applications—including land surveys—is proven and well documented.

The BLM is the Federal Government's official record keeper for over 200 years' worth of land records spanning the entire nation. Over the centuries, the BLM and its predecessor agencies have surveyed almost 1.5 billion acres across the country. BLM's DPPS

method builds on the agency's legacy of innovation in this important field and will be integrated into the BLM's work nationwide, including potential use for speeding up conveyance of Alaska Native Corporation Lands.

The BLM manages more than 245 million acres of public land, the most of any Federal agency. This land, known as the National System of Public Lands, is primarily located in 12 Western states, including Alaska. The BLM also administers 700 million acres of sub-surface mineral estate throughout the nation. The BLM's mission is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of America's public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. In Fiscal Year 2015, the BLM generated $4.1 billion in receipts from activities occurring on public lands.

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