

As Prepared for Delivery

Speech to the Alaska Federation of Natives

Friday, October 23, 2009

Introduction

Good morning everyone. Greetings from the Obama administration and the Department of Agriculture. Thank you for the introduction and opportunity to be here with you at the Alaska Federation of Natives convention. This is quite the event.

Acknowledgements

Thank you Julie Kitka for the invitation and George Irvin for organizing everything. I'd also like to recognize some of my staff who are here and have been great tour guides—specifically the new Rural Development State Director - Jim Nordlund. We haven't had a fulltime director in the office for three years – but we've got a great one on the job now. Jim is a general contractor, former state legislator and has spent about 20 years in Alaska politics. I'd like to thank Merlaine Kruse (Cruise) – who filled in as Acting State Director for about eight months before Nordlund. Also, I can not forget to thank Chad Padgett – who was the Acting State Director for two years before Merlaine – and now state director for Representative Don Young. I hope you'll get to know my staffers who are here and who work in Palmer, Sitka, Kenai, Fairbanks, Nome and Dillingham.

Let me quickly start off by addressing an issue that many have brought up in Alaska and back in Washington. There has been interest in what's happening with the state's unused water and waste funds, so I am here now to tell you that we are motivated to get this money out and we have been pushing with Senators Murkowski, Begich and others on the hill to get it moving.

I know you don't want to just hear someone from Washington taking a flight in to Anchorage. You want to hear a message that is truthful and substantive. I am making a promise that we will have projects in construction by next summer. Due to the diligent efforts on the part of Rural Development staff and others, like the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC), and the Department of Environmental Conservation, we will find a solution to getting the money out of banks and into projects that improve the quality of life for rural Alaskans.

We have a new administration

It's not enough for us to have a focus on rural America; it's a focus on Alaska that is needed. And President Obama has committed to that. He sent four Secretaries here in August. My Deputy Under Secretary, Victor Vasquez, has been here twice meeting with native organizations in Anchorage and Southeast Alaska. Our Rural Utilities Administrator Jonathan Adelstein will be visiting in the spring, but right now it's my turn.

With tough conditions, difficult roads, barge shipments and cultural considerations to keep in mind - we acknowledge that doing a project in rural Alaska is different than in say, South Dakota. I see that – particularly after visiting Kivalina and two self-help housing sites in the Mat-Su valley. The Secretary has tasked me with finding ways to improve the work we do and the relationships we have. It's why I'm here, familiarizing myself with all that we are doing and all that we need to do.

Rural Development has regulations and processes in place, but they may not always work for village Alaska. I realize that I can't figure out how we can help in a day and it can't be done from a desk in Washington, DC, but we are taking steps to look at our procedures. We are holding a process improvement session this winter with all funding agencies to review and speed up the current process. All with the construction season in mind. I know you are looking for what many of us in the rural lower 48 are looking for: jobs, broadband and a better quality of life. However, it's clear to me that you can't begin to think of solutions until you've actually been to Alaska.

We have done a lot of work and a lot of good, but there's a lot more that we can and should do. And to start - we need help getting our Recovery act money out the door. We must think beyond basic needs. We're here to lay pipes and sewer systems, but it's also important to invest in small businesses and community facilities. We must take advantage of Broadband funds and Alaska's vast energy sources – specifically wind, biofuels, geothermal, tidal and hydro. There are probably more energy resources in this state than the rest of the country

We have never before seen levels of funding available, but we must invest wisely. As of October 2, our Business & Industry Guaranteed Loan program had over \$1 billion in funding available. Our Community Facilities has about \$1.2 billion in funding, while our Single Family Housing and Water and Waste programs have about \$2 billion each left in funding.

So how do we get these funds out? Well, we need your help. I believe it's through strategic partnerships and working regionally. This is a challenge which requires us to build rural communities that can create wealth, are self-sustaining, repopulating and thriving economically. Smart, sustainable investments are critical to the economic strength of rural America and require collaboration.

One example, which is already underway, is our work with the Forest Service and the Economic Development Association to form a regional plan for Southeast Alaska's Tongass Forest. We are visiting communities, holding listening sessions and asking citizens to develop a list of local projects that, if built, would lead to economic development in the area.

You are our eyes and ears on the ground and as we look to fund new projects, we need partnership and input from you. Jim Nordlund is leading the charge on improving our outreach, presence and relationships across the state. The Palmer state office's number is (907) 761-7705.

We can combine our funds with your experiences. You are leaders in your communities and I challenge you to consider the role that your organizations can play. We can grow access to new capital and credit funding, but together we can improve economies through mobilizing local leaders and encouraging entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

As I wrap up, I want you to know that I'm truly impressed on all fronts by the Members of Congress representing you in Washington, DC. My staff has had very productive meetings and they care deeply about Alaska and Alaska's citizens.

You may be used to hearing from "Washington Insiders," and I guess I am one now. I live in Washington, but I'm from South Dakota, and grew up on a dairy farmer. Rural Development's programs are managed in DC, but they're implemented in the states. Continue working with us. Our goal is to serve rural America as best we can; and we welcome and encourage participation from our rural partners.

I thank you again for the opportunity to be here. If there is a message that this South Dakotan, turned Washingtonian, can leave with you - it's that we're committed to building strategic partnerships, building leadership and building sound sustainable projects for Alaskans.

Thank you.