

Grant to boost public land survey

—By Marc Covert

Few government or private organizations depend as heavily on the skills of surveyors as the Bureau of Land Management. Charged to “sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations,” the Bureau manages 261 million acres of public lands in the Western United States and Alaska. Managing so much land for various purposes—outdoor recreation, mineral development, livestock grazing, energy production, and many more—would be impossible without accurate survey data.

The BLM has nurtured a relationship with Oregon Tech since the 1970s, a fact demonstrated by the large number of Oregon Tech alumni on their cadastral surveying staff. “I would say that about 60 percent of BLM surveyors graduated from our program,” says Sarsenski. “We are one of very few programs across the Nation that offers a four-year degree in geomatics. Working with us and supporting our program in turn supports the long-term efforts of the BLM.”

But those numbers are likely to plummet over the next five years. “Were already experiencing a shortage of surveyors,” says Bishop. “Many of our surveyors came to BLM as a result of a cooperative education program we started with Oregon Tech in the 1970s. They’ve got 30-plus years with the agency now, so we have this huge influx of folks retiring.” Nearly half of BLM’s surveyors over the age of 50 could be gone by 2010, and the implications are unsettling. “Our backlog of work would just get bigger and bigger,” says Bishop. “For example, we recently evaluated survey requirements for Native American reservations and found that nearly \$100

million worth of surveying needs to be done on that land alone.”

Better outreach to the Native American community was identified as one of the ways of addressing that shortage. “The BLM has the only authority to survey Indian land,” explains Bishop. “The tribes have an interest in becoming self-sufficient and doing the surveys themselves. But to do that, they need to be qualified. So Don Buhler and I decided, “Lets make OIT a center of excellence for public land survey systems training and focus on recruitment of Native Americans.” Furthermore, under the new grant from BLM, funds will be provided to continue an internship and scholarship program, begun in 2002, which provides \$2,000 scholarships to geomatics students who intern with the BLM during the summer.

BLM’s Don Buhler does his best to deflect praise for making the grant possible, but he is already thinking of the future, meeting with industry leaders in an effort to ensure support for the geomatics program well beyond the five-year span of the grant. “I really think some of the survey industry land information groups need to do this as much as the government,” he says. “Id like to see them help expand the program or, eventually, take it over. I’m trying to leverage industry more and more to step up and follow our example.”

“My personal goal would be to double our existing enrollment of 44 geomatics majors over the five-year life span of this program,” says Sarsenski. “The shortage of surveyors obviously puts our program in a very good light. I can’t think of a recent geomatics graduate from Oregon Tech who has not had multiple job offers.”



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