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***Alaska Marketplace* Finalists Selected** **50 Rural Innovators to Hone Ideas to Help Rural Economies**

ANCHORAGE, AK: 50 finalists from across Alaska have been selected to advance to the next round of the inaugural *Alaska Marketplace* competition, enabling them to vie for a portion of the \$200,000 in award money. Nearly 30 assessors met at the BP Energy Center in Anchorage last week to review the 156 eligible concept papers and select finalists to advance to the next phase of the competition.

“I was thoroughly impressed with the range and quality of the ideas we saw in this first round of the competition and hope to be invited back to serve as an assessor in next year’s competition,” said *Alaska Marketplace* Assessor Dean Stewart, Director of Business Programs at USDA Rural Development in Alaska. “*Alaska Marketplace*’s first round was a smashing success.”

Alaska Marketplace received more than 170 concept papers from across Alaska with 39 percent from Southcentral Alaska, 20 percent from Western Alaska, 16 percent from the Southeast, 13 percent from the Arctic region, 8 percent from the Interior and 4 percent from the Aleutian Islands. The 156 concept papers that met eligibility requirements fit into six main categories: Energy & Technology, Arts & Crafts, Environment & Land Use, Heritage, Tourism and General.

"I believe with the tremendous response we've received from participants from throughout Alaska this project has not only proven that there is a need", said Freddie Christiansen, AFN Alaska Marketplace spokesman, formerly of Old Harbor, " but will hopefully be around for years to come."

Finalists have until March 20 to write a more comprehensive business plan with the help of entrepreneurial coaches. Rural residents will be given small stipends to fund their travel to Anchorage for the *Alaska Marketplace* final competition on April 6-7, 2006 at the ConocoPhillips atrium where the finalists will “pitch” their ideas in-person to the judges, who will choose approximately 20 winners to receive start-up funds for their ideas. The public will also be encouraged to attend and cast their vote for "People's Choice" awards. The two-day event will feature workshops and speakers for the finalists, business community and interested public.

A list of the 50 Alaska Marketplace finalists is attached. Contact information for select finalists is available upon request.

The *Alaska Marketplace* is an exciting new program for Alaskans with innovative ideas on how to create jobs and stimulate rural village economies. Initiated by the Denali Commission, the Alaska Marketplace is supported by a growing list of inaugural partners, including the State of Alaska, Alaska Federation of Natives, Alaska Growth Capital, Alaska Manufacturing Extension Partnership, Alaska Village Initiatives, BP, College of Rural Alaska UAF, ConocoPhillips Alaska and the Telecommunications Development Fund. For more information on the *Alaska Marketplace* initiative, visit www.alaskamarketplace.org.

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