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Title: AFN calls for ideas -
RURAL ALASKA: Winners receive money, mentoring for businesses.
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The Alaska Federation of Natives has created a business-idea competition to benefit rural Alaskans based on the best of years of trial-and-error learning at the World Bank. The winners get money and mentoring; semifinalists get coaching to refine their ideas.

"You can't change the world with \$200,000 by itself," the amount waiting for winners, said Veronica Slajer, a consultant for the AFN. Instead, the hope is that a simple application process and lots of help for contestants can foster creativity and turn ideas into culturally workable, cash-producing results.

"We don't know if it's going to work. That's what makes the whole thing kind of exciting," Slajer said. "We predict it will be successful but we can't predict how it will be successful."

Any Alaska resident can enter; preference is given to projects that benefit rural Alaska.

The contest theme is "Culture and Development," a broad enough theme to range from cultural tourism to technology development.

Jeff Peterson heard about the competition at the AFN convention last month in Fairbanks, where he won a small-business award. Peterson, owner of Kodiak Combos fishing and hunting guide service in Old Harbor, said it seemed perfect for people who create arts and crafts in their home and could use the money for marketing.

"The Internet, it's almost like the Holy Grail for marketing," said Peterson, adding that it allows villagers to avoid expense and danger. "You don't have to leave the village -- fly, take a boat if the weather's not right."

And winning \$10,000 or more could make a big difference, he said.

"In the village, that's quite a bit," he said.

The program is based on Development Marketplace, a competitive grant program of the World Bank that aims to fund innovative, small-scale development projects that can be expanded or replicated. Winners include:

- * An effort to boost eco- and ethno-tourism in rural Chile by nurturing the barn owl population, battered by deforestation, so owls can better prey on infected rodents that scare away visitors. The idea got \$100,600.
- * A \$120,000 grant in Azerbaijan promotes using locally made plastic boxes to transport fruit, instead of the wooden boxes, made from illegally harvested trees, that are thrown away after one use.
- * In Bolivia, \$73,000 helped train indigenous leaders as health promoters among rural immigrants to the city of Cochambamba, boosting clinic use. The grant also helped bring the model to medical schools.

Katherine Stalberg was the U.S. liaison for the Cochambamba grant. Stalberg said she doubted the work would've happened without the grant, and the gathering for the final round of competition was inspiring.

"You had literally a marketplace of ideas," Stalberg said.

This is the first AFN-sponsored contest, so Slajer said AFN executives will review the first round of submissions, due Dec. 15, and finalize plans for supporting contestants from there.

Contestants need to submit a few pages explaining their ideas, which four judges will evaluate. Slajer said the AFN is looking for volunteers to help assess the proposals, including business people, bankers or anyone else with relevant experience.

The first cut comes in February. Then contestants will be paired with a coach to create a final entry that's more like a business plan, which will be due by late March.

The winners will receive money and mentoring for a year.

Businesses and agencies have been quick to offer money and technical help, Slajer said.

Because the contest is simple and unbureaucratic, she said, finding partners "has been a breeze."

The Denali Commission, which is funded with federal money, initiated the competition, which is co-sponsored by 11 businesses and agencies, including the AFN. For more information, go to www.alaskamarketplace.org.

FOR MORE about the **Alaska Marketplace** and the Development Marketplace, to go

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