

Governing failed in emergency response

COMPASS: Other points of view

By RICHARD FINEBERG

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"I promised that we would protect this beautiful environment while safely and ethically developing resources, and we did," former Gov. Sarah Palin proclaimed at her farewell address July 26, citing creation of two new bureaucratic organizations.

Recent developments at the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) tell a different story.

In May 2007 the governor proudly proclaimed she was launching a comprehensive risk assessment of Alaska's oil and gas infrastructure. The Alaska Risk Assessment (ARA), which would cost \$5 million and take two to three years to complete, would be "a thorough, independent appraisal" that would "identify facilities and systems that pose the greatest risk of failure, along with measures to reduce risks."

As Sarah Palin leaves office, the risk assessment is in shambles. According to DEC project manager Ira Rosen, the project is temporarily at a "full stop," primarily because the state has been unable to secure the cooperation of the petroleum industry to provide the necessary information. Rosen also confirmed that DEC pulled the contractors off the job after the project plan was resoundingly denounced during the public comment period that ended June 2.

After reviewing the proposed methodology, more than a dozen environmental groups and informed citizens (this writer included) recommended that DEC terminate the project because the risk assessment's original intent had been severely watered down. They felt the proposal would generate meaningless statistical results due to failure to focus on the condition of field facilities, the implementation of management practices and the adequacy of government oversight.

The risk assessment is just one example of a DEC problem that Gov. Palin has ignored. In May of this year, as Alaska's annual ice jams broke with unusual force, then-Gov. Palin visited flood sites and was effusive in her praise of agency response to the spring flooding. But Ed Meggert, the man who ran the field response for DEC's Fairbanks office for more than a decade, begs to differ.

Although Meggert was pleased with his team's field performance, he also had serious problems with the way the agency's home office handled the spring emergency. In Meggert's view, a bloated and dysfunctional bureaucracy failed to provide the field personnel, training and logistical support necessary to deal with the emergency in a timely manner.

"We did a good job," he said, "but we struggled." With too many deskbound responders and too few in the field, on more than one occasion he was forced to dispatch responders to operate solo in remote locations, when his training and experience told him the personnel for whom he was responsible should have been working in teams to assure their safety.

In a June 16 memorandum, Meggert took the problem up with his superiors. "I will not send staff into potentially dangerous situation again without proper support," Meggert declared.

He noted that when he asked his home office for immediate assistance as the floods rolled downriver,

response was slow because the managers were elsewhere, observing an oil spill training exercise. Meggert wanted to know: How could the emergency response support desk be left unattended? To assure more effective response in the future, he requested immediate correction of this problem.

Dissatisfied with his agency's response, Meggert has served notice that he is retiring after 20 years in state service. His resignation letter concluded:

"As one of our managers has stated on several occasions, 'It doesn't matter whether we do a good job as long as we look good.' I was not raised that way. I have not lived that way. And I no longer wish to be associated with an agency that thinks and acts that way."

These two recent developments show: It is one thing to twitter and make speeches; it is another to govern effectively.

Veteran oil and gas analyst Richard A. Fineberg of Ester evaluated the Alaska Risk Assessment project for environmental organizations.

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