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## My Turn: DEC developments show Palin did not walk her talk

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By Richard A. Fineberg | My Turn

"I promised that we would protect this beautiful environment while safely and ethically developing resources, and we did. We built a petroleum oversight office and a subcabinet to study climate conditions," former Gov. Sarah Palin proclaimed at her farewell address in Fairbanks July 26.

But recent developments at the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation sully her claim.

In May 2007, Palin proudly launched an oil and gas infrastructure review slated to cost \$5 million and take two to three years to complete. The Alaska Risk Assessment project was to be "a thorough, independent appraisal" that would "identify facilities and systems that pose the greatest risk of failure, along with measures to reduce risks."

Two years later, the ARA project is in shambles. According to DEC project manager Ira Rosen, the project is temporarily at "full stop," primarily because the state has not been able to secure industry cooperation in providing the necessary information. After spending more than \$1.3 million, DEC pulled the ARA contractors off the job when 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 concerned citizens (this writer included) recommended that DEC terminate the project for a variety of reasons that included:

- excessive reliance on statistical data;
- inadequate field review to assure data accuracy and relevance;
- failure to secure access to either the necessary data or the petroleum facilities;
- focus on major catastrophic events, to the exclusion of consideration of chronic pollution and lesser safety problems;
- failure to establish clear definitions and criteria for evaluating potential hazards;
- inadequate attention to management principles and practices; and
- narrowing of project requirements to exclude recommendations by the project contractor and evaluation of the adequacy of government oversight.

As governor, Palin ignored other DEC problems. For example, when Alaska's annual ice jams broke with unusual force last May, the governor visited flood sites and was effusive in her praise of agency performance. But the man who ran the field response for DEC's Fairbanks office begs to differ.

For more than a decade, Ed Meggert headed DEC's northern region emergency field response team, which covers by far the largest area of the state. Meggert was pleased with his team's field

performance but 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 with too many responders in desk jobs and too few in the field, as the floods rolled downriver both personnel and resources were lacking. Consequently, he was forced to dispatch responders to remote locations alone, 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, the response was slow because the managers were out, observing an oil spill training exercise. Meggert wanted to know: How could the DEC home office emergency response support desk be left unattended? To assure more effective response in the future, he requested immediate correction of this problem.

Several weeks later, dissatisfied with his agency's response, Meggert resigned after 20 years in state service. His farewell 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."

It is one thing to Twitter and make speeches; it is another to govern effectively. The latter requires follow-through to insure performance. DEC's problems is emblematic of Palin's striking failure, as governor, to walk her talk.

- Oil and gas analyst Richard A. Fineberg of Ester evaluated the Alaska Risk Assessment project for environmental organizations. During the past 35 years, he has observed Alaska oil and gas development as a newspaper reporter, as a consultant to various local, state and federal agencies, as a senior oil and gas policy advisor to the governor of Alaska (during the late 1980's), as an aide to Gov. Sarah Palin on petroleum production tax legislation in 2007 and as a commentator at [www.finebergresearch.com](http://www.finebergresearch.com).

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