

Somerville reinstated at Fish & Game

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Tundra Times

Ron Somerville, the deposed Game Department Director who was transferred to another Fish and Game job because his campaign to repeal the state Subsistence Law made him "ineffective," was ordered to be reinstated as Game Director last week.

If Somerville accepts the reinstatement he could lose his job because it is basically a political appointment. If he were to retain the job of liaison officer between the state and federal Fish and Game departments he would be classed as a civil servant and would not be subject to a political job switch.

By remaining as liaison officer Somerville would be able to finish 20 years of service to the state and collect full retirement benefits. He has worked for the state a little more than 19 years.

If he is terminated, he would lose those benefits.

The order came from Gov. Jay Hammond after the lame duck governor received a legal opinion from his attorney general, Will Condon.

Condon, acting on an inquiry from Somerville's attorney, William T. Council, ruled that Somerville's constitutional right to free speech was violated by his transfer.

Somerville was relieved of his department head duties on Nov. 10 by lame duck Fish

and Game Commissioner Ron Skoog, who stated in his letter of transfer that the transfer would remove Somerville from a position in which he was rendered ineffective by his active campaign in favor of the subsistence repeal proposition.

The Skoog memo stated that he had warned Somerville that such an action might be forthcoming if the deputy took unpaid leave to campaign against the subsistence law but Skoog did grant Somerville leave.

Somerville had offered to resign before campaigning for the law repeal but Skoog and Hammond rejected that action saying they didn't want

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Sheffield to replace official shrouded in controversy

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to fan the emotional fires of the election debate.

Condon said, "It is my firm opinion that due to the volatile debate regarding Proposition 7 and the sensitive, policy-making responsibilities of the director of the Division of Game, it would have been proper and enforceable to notify Mr. Somerville that he would be subject to discharge were he to publically advocate the passage of Proposition 7.

"It is another matter, however, for the state to authorize Mr. Somerville to take personal leave for the expressed purpose of campaigning in support of the passage of Proposition 7, yet relieve Mr. Somerville of his duties due to the political consequences of such authorized activities.

"Once a public official is authorized to engage in political conduct, a public employee's political views, however unpopular, must be accorded the full panoply of constitutional protection."

Neither Somerville nor his attorney would discuss the matter with reporters last week.

Another Fish and Game Department official likely to be job hunting soon is Department Commissioner Ron Skoog.

Gov.-Elect Bill Sheffield announced last week that he will replace Skoog sometime after Jan. 31 when Sheffield appoints six new members to the state boards of Fish and Game.

Skoog, who was re-appointed to another five-year term last year by Hammond, said the subsistence battle is the cause of the replacement.

"There's been so much disruption and controversy during the election and there's been an awful lot of animosity that's developed as part of the whole campaign," Skoog said. "I would understand the governor-elect wanting a person who hasn't been involved in the controversy."