



We hardly knew you, Don Harris: First energy director quits in disgust

by *Tundra Times* staff

Don Harris understood his job: reorganize state rural energy programs, downsize the programs for greater cost-efficiency and preserve existing service levels. He says his charge came from the energy legislation past last spring, and from Edgar Blatchford, commissioner of community and regional affairs, the agency picked to house the new Division of Energy which Harris headed after his selection in June.

As a former state transportation commissioner and legislator, he was no stranger to state government, or politics. As a pragmatist, he could see no future in a climate where his superiors, particularly deputy commissioner of community and regional affairs Bruce Geraghty, and politicians chose to interfere with the mission he'd been given. So he quit.

Harris says Blatchford charged

him with insuring there was no break in rural energy services but fulfilling that charge was impossible because legislators were pressing him to lay off too many staff. Then other DCRA officials began interfering with his efforts. He says Remond Henderson, DCRA's administrative services director, wanted to move the energy division staff into his own division.

"I went out and hired a person, and they organized him out of the structure," Harris said. "It has been very disruptive. Things were working very well (but) this interjection of people was very disruptive."

"I think if the agency could get settled down that they can receive the service."

Harris also blames Geraghty for the disarray in the new division.

"Geraghty's doing this thing," Harris said.

Brent Petrie, formerly manager

of project development in the Alaska Energy Authority and one of those recently given notice in the sweeping reorganization, said Harris had a strong commitment to rural programs.

"He wanted to make sure jobs are provided in rural communities, as well as a good standard of engineering and inspection. With this change, this diminishment of staff, it will be a challenge to maintain the same level of standard."

"By midsummer he was under pressure to make changes. Everybody understood that the organization would be downsized and he and others came up with a plan to do that. The plan would have accomplished many of the legislative goals through December of this year. But then he was ordered to make further revisions. He felt these orders infringed on the authority he'd been given," said one former staffer who declined to be identified.

The Energy Equation:

Rural energy costs
+ political power

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