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## **STAFF FEARS POLITICS ARE PRIORITY AT DNR OUTDOORS: SOME SAY RECENT REASSIGNMENTS HAVE RAISED CONCERNS ABOUT THE AGENCY'S MISSION**

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Page: 01A

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The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources is shifting its emphasis away from resource protection in an effort to appease special interest groups, say two former employees.

Three Northeastern Minnesota field biologists have similar concerns, saying the recent reassignment of two longtime employees amid an ATV controversy in northwestern Minnesota has created doubt and confusion among current field staff.

The reassignments have had a "chilling effect" among wildlife field staff, said Rich Staffon, DNR area wildlife manager in Cloquet.

DNR Commissioner Gene Merriam insists the agency's first priority remains resource conservation while providing for recreational and commercial use of state lands.

Debate about the DNR's direction and how field staff should approach their jobs came to the forefront last week when Jim Breyen, former DNR regional wildlife manager at Bemidji, spoke publicly about his reassignment last month! . He was reassigned during a heated controversy over the use of all-terrain vehicles in Beltrami Island State Forest south of Warroad.

The matter has statewide implications because the DNR is just starting the process of making recommendations about the use of ATVs and other off-highway vehicles in all 54 state forests.

More than 2,000 people attended a Feb. 17 meeting in Warroad to oppose the DNR's proposal to limit the use of OHVs in Beltrami Island State Forest. Two ATV manufacturers -- Polaris in Roseau and Arctic Cat in Thief River Falls -- provided buses to transport employees and citizens to the hearing. The DNR announced that night it would rework its proposal.

Breyen, 58, had been involved in making the DNR's original recommendations for ATV trails in the state forest. He chose to retire from the DNR, where he had worked for nearly 35 years, rather than be reassigned. Paul Swenson was also relieved of his duties as DNR regional administrator in Bemidji and reassigned as a liaison with American Indian bands.

In a telephone interview Thursday, Merriam declined to discuss Swenson's or Breyen's specific situations.

“I was told I was being reassigned because they needed a new face up there,” Breyen said in a telephone interview Friday.

Breyen contends he was relieved of his duties in part because of his position on ATV issues. Merriam has dismissed Breyen's accusations.

With no other explanation given for either Breyen's or Swenson's reassignments, DNR field staff are reaching their own conclusions.

“When it came out in the paper that neither Paul's reassignment or Jim's resignation had anything to do with ATVs, I thought, ‘How naive do they think we and the general public are?’” said Dave Dickey, who has been DNR area wildlife manager at Aitkin for the past 36 years. “It's so blatantly obvious.”

#### REASSIGNMENTS RARE

Such reassignments have been rare in the DNR, especially at the regional level, several DNR employees said.

“What makes the recent events difficult to understand is that it appears a staff member was relieved of his duties for doing his job and doing it well,” said Staffon, DNR area wildlife manager at Cloquet and a 25-year DNR employee. “This is having a chilling effect on wildlife staff and is something that should concern conservationists in Minnesota.”

“In my tenure of almost 40 years, I have not seen a situation like this, where people have been moved around, shall we say,” Dickey said.

Fisheries or wildlife officials at DNR headquarters in St. Paul have occasionally been reassigned, and last year, Merriam and Deputy DNR Commissioner Mark Holsten reorganized the Division of Fish and Wildlife, eliminating three supervisory positions.

Merriam said he cannot discuss the reassignment of Swenson and Breyen for legal reasons.

“I understand why that creates problems for other employees,” he said.

Merriam said he received no pressure from Gov. ! Tim Pawlenty, the governor's office or anyone else outside the DNR to make the personnel changes.

Field staff and others said the lack of explanation from the commissioner's office has been troubling.

“What it comes down to is that we only receive part of the story of what's happened,” said Chris Kavanaugh, DNR area fisheries supervisor at Grand Rapids. “We ask ourselves, ‘What's happening there?’ In the absence of information, you speculate and hear rumors.”

#### SILENCE

Breyen said that under Merriam the DNR is less open and field staff are more hesitant to have

frank and open discussions with the public and the news media.

“By that, I mean people have been intimidated into being careful about what they say,” Breyen said. “Even if they're speaking accurately, if it's something the commissioner or anyone in the commissioner's office doesn't like, it's understood there could be ramifications.”

The reassignments have some DNR employees concerned about the role they are to play in helping evaluate existing ATV trails in state forests and making recommendations about which trails should be left open. Staffon is involved in that process with the Cloquet Valley State Forest.

“We had an OHV planning meeting (Tuesday), and we kind of kidded around: Do we keep going the way we have been?” Staffon said. “We decided we're going to forge ahead and do this the way we have been doing it, and focus on what we would do as resource managers. But it's in the back of everyone's mind. You try not to let it affect how you do your job, but it kind of colors your thinking a little bit.”

Bill Berg of Bovey, who retired after 31 years as a DNR wildlife research biologist in 2001 and still does contract work with the agency, says the recent turn of events in northwestern Minnesota is troubling to field biologists.

“I think morale is really low because of this,” Berg said. Wildlife managers “probably don't know how much they can do regarding managing the natural resources or cowing down to industry. They shouldn't be caught in the middle, but now they are. I've talked to a lot of managers since this, and generally the morale is really low.”

Merriam framed the question this way: “Are you going to support your staff and stick with the staff-developed plan, or are you going to yield to public pressure? We're going to use our staff input. We're going to use public input. And we'll do our best to protect the resource while providing for public recreational opportunities, motorized and nonmotorized.”

Breyen isn't sure what that means.

“The commissioner talks about balance,” Breyen said. “He wants to balance the interests of the locals with conservation. What does that mean? That's all we're asking. And he'll never give you an answer.”

#### SHIFTING ROLE?

Some field staff are concerned about what they see as a possible change in the DNR's role.

“I think as resource managers, our first priority is to protect the resources, and our second is to provide sustainable use of that resource,” Staffon said. “It feels like that's tilting more now on providing more use. OHVs are a good example. I can't say that I've seen that happen yet, but you get the feeling that the emphasis is different.”

Breyen thinks it's already happening. “Absolutely,” he said. “No question. (Until now), it's

never been a situation where the special interests drive the train, where the common good is given second stage."

Although the ATV issue affects fisheries field staff in a less direct way than wildlife staff, the DNR's Kavanaugh says that as a fisheries supervisor he must deal with politics at times.

"I think for many of us, it's tough to accept some of the political realities," Kavanaugh said. "We're trained as scientists and biologists. We look at the scientific facts of things. Quite frankly, many times we don't understand the political influences that get brought into decisions that are made. But it's a lot easier to accept it with the communication (from superiors) that comes with it."

Berg says the DNR's role is moving in a different direction.

"Over time, where (DNR) management just used to be for the resource, now it's geared toward special interests and special uses," Berg said. "Not that resource management is taking a back seat, but it's lesser."

Merriam contends the DNR is not shifting away from resource protection.

"First and foremost, in everything we've been doing, is conservation, sustainability," Merriam said. "That's consistent with our mission of providing for recreation and commercial activity on a sustainable basis, but first and foremost is resource conservation."

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