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## Politics

# Ruedrich resigns post as regulator on state oil and gas commission

By Sean Cockerham

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Republican Party of Alaska Chairman Randy Ruedrich on Saturday resigned his job as a state oil and gas regulator in the face of mounting conflict of interest allegations.

Ruedrich said he decided to resign his \$118,000 job as a member of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission because the controversy was bad for the Republican Party of Alaska.

"I think the ethics issue was way overblown," Ruedrich said in an interview. "But I felt the right thing to do is to end this."

Ruedrich was one of three members of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, a quasi-judicial state agency that regulates oil and gas development.

But he was also active in the party, a post that included fund raising from the industries he regulated.

Critics, including some prominent Republicans, said it was a blatant conflict of interest.

On Friday, AOGCC Chair Sarah Palin had said the conflict of interest questions were hurting the agency's credibility. She said then that she might resign unless Ruedrich resolved his conflict.

"The right thing has been done here," Palin said Saturday. "Randy was a qualified engineer for the commission but there was a conflict with him being a party chairman."

Ruedrich resigned after a Saturday afternoon conversation with Gov. Frank Murkowski. But Ruedrich said the governor didn't ask him to step down.

His resignation was made public in a terse statement released Saturday night by the Murkowski administration. The statement said that the resignation is effective immediately and the governor thanked Ruedrich for his contribution to the AOGCC.

Murkowski spokesman John Manly refused to elaborate on what happened or whether Murkowski felt Ruedrich had a conflict of interest.

Ruedrich, as Republican Party chairman, was one of the architects of Murkowski's gubernatorial victory last fall. Murkowski appointed him to the AOGCC job in the spring, citing Ruedrich's decades of experience in the oil and gas industry.

Democrat lawmakers objected it was a conflict of interest. But the Republican-dominated Legislature voted in March to confirm the appointment.

GOP lawmakers cited assurances that Ruedrich was going to focus on federal politics and would not raise funds for state campaigns.

But on Sept. 16 Ruedrich joined with several oil company executives to host a fundraiser for the re-election campaign of Fairbanks North Star Borough Mayor Rhonda Boyles.

Then the next week Ruedrich went to Ketchikan to help select a replacement for Wrangell Republican state Sen. Robin Taylor, who had resigned to take a job that Murkowski created for him in the Alaska Department of Transportation.

Critics also took Ruedrich to task for an e-mail to Republican Party members asking for support of coal bed methane development in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley. Part of Ruedrich's state job was overseeing such development.

Then last week, it surfaced that Ruedrich had distributed an e-mail notice for a "major fund raiser" to benefit the state House Republican Majority. Ruedrich said he hadn't known it was a fund-raiser when he sent it.

But publicity surrounding the e-mail set off calls for Ruedrich to resign either from the oil and gas commission or from his party chairmanship.

Ruedrich said Saturday that he chose to leave the AOGCC because he hadn't expected to fill out his full six-year term on it anyway. He said he joined the commission in order to find ways to make it more efficient. And, on Friday, Ruedrich said he submitted a proposal to change how the AOGCC works.

His proposal is for the AOGCC to have just one director and some part-time commissioners, instead of three full-time commissioners.

It would make the AOGCC more efficient, he said. The concept is based on a report Ruedrich wrote in 1999 while on a state privatization commission.

Palin said she has also been pushing to make the AOGCC more efficient. She said Saturday that she had not seen Ruedrich's latest proposal but that the basic concept might work. She said that she would favor making fellow commissioner Dan Seamount the director.

Ruedrich said he plans to remain as chairman of the Republican Party of Alaska, which is a volunteer position. He said that because he is a member of the Republican National Committee, a new campaign finance reform law has prohibited him from fund-raising for campaigns for statewide office.

But that law is being challenged in court, he said. So Ruedrich said he might dive back into state fund-raising.

"We'll re-evaluate what role I take in terms of total party operations or just sticking with the federal side," Ruedrich said.

Ruedrich said he has received a great deal of support from fellow Republicans. And he doesn't think the ethics allegations against him will hurt his effectiveness as chairman of the state party.

But Palin, a well-known Republican and former mayor of Wasilla, is not so sure about that. She said that she has heard from a lot of Republicans who wondered why Ruedrich hadn't been able to see that he had a conflict of interest.

"It was a very simple issue," Palin said. "It was black and white."

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### Sean Cockerham

Sean Cockerham is a former reporter for the Anchorage Daily News. He also covered Alaska issues for McClatchy Newspapers based in Washington, D.C.





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