

## Corbett fires conservation official

### Action could affect state's oversight of drilling in parks

Monday, January 16, 2012  
 By Don Hopey, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The longtime head of the citizens advisory committee that has oversight of the state's parks and forests was fired Friday by the Corbett administration, a termination that council members say was illegal and raises concerns about reduced public accountability of Marcellus Shale gas drilling in state forests.

Kurt Leitholf, who served as executive director of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Citizens Advisory Council since 1996, was told Wednesday that his position would be eliminated. He was let go two days later.

Mr. Leitholf, 56, said that even though he was hired by and worked for the independent committee, he was told by a DCNR administrator that he was an "at will employee" and that the governor's office had determined this position was no longer needed.

"The legislation creating the advisory committee seems to say it has the right to employ the staff it needs, but it's a unique position because my paycheck came from DCNR," said Mr. Leitholf, who admitted to being "disappointed" by the administration's decision.

Christina Novak, DCNR spokeswoman, said Joe Graci, the department's legislative liaison, will become the department's "adviser to the council" and perform Mr. Leitholf's executive director duties in addition to his liaison duties.

"The department has paid for the support staff for the council and has determined that funding a full-time executive director is not cost-effective," Ms. Novak said in an email response to questions about the firing. "DCNR will continue to provide support staff to the advisory council and remains fully committed to providing the council with the resources it needs to carry out its work."



Although the administration decided not to fund Mr. Leitholf's position and reassigned his administrative assistant to other duties within the department a couple of months ago, the DCNR has in the past year expanded its own administrative staffing, adding two new executive assistant positions.

Eric Martin, one of two remaining original council members, said Mr. Leitholf's firing has less to do with the budget and more to do with an attempt by the Corbett administration to pre-empt public oversight of DCNR at a time when the administration is said to be considering opening up more state forest land for Marcellus Shale gas drilling.

"I have been a member of the council since its inception and was part of the group that interviewed and ultimately hired Kurt as our executive director," Mr. Martin wrote in an email. "Aside from what we the council feel was an illegal firing, this is a clear message from the executive suite regarding citizen involvement and transparency. Funny that one of our hot topics is Marcellus Shale."

Pennsylvania has leased a third of its 2.1 million-acre forest system for oil and gas drilling -- more than 130,000 acres of that for Marcellus Shale deep wells. Under the Rendell administration, DCNR warned that additional oil and gas development would damage the ecology and wild character of the forests.

Jeff Schmidt, director of the Sierra Club Pennsylvania Chapter, said Mr. Leitholf's firing undercuts the independence of the advisory committee and will hamper its ability to scrutinize drilling in state forests and parks at a crucial time.

"The [advisory council] serves an important, independent oversight function. By terminating its director, DCNR is reducing the ability of [the advisory committee] to independently investigate the activities of the agency that manages Pennsylvania's public parks and forests," Mr. Schmidt said. "As the Corbett administration ignores public opinion and converts more and more of our public lands to gas drilling industrial zones, we need greater oversight, not less."

John Quigley, DCNR secretary under Gov. Ed Rendell and special adviser to Citizens for Pennsylvania's Future, said it is his understanding that the council's executive director position was under department control, but that in practice the council staffing decisions have historically been made collaboratively by the council and the department.

"Because of the budget issues there may have been no choice," Mr. Quigley said, noting that the department's general fund budget was cut 30 percent this year, though oil and gas leasing and timber sale revenues helped offset much of that reduction. "But clearly, if there is additional pressure on the agency [to approve more gas leasing], then that is a situation that requires that the citizens committee voice be heard."

The 19-member advisory council was established in 1995, at the same time the Department of Environmental Resources was split into the Department of Environmental Protection and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Its members are appointed by the governor, and General Assembly to provide nonpartisan, independent "advice regarding the conservation and stewardship of the commonwealth's natural resources."

Mr. Leitholf said Marcellus Shale drilling issues in state forests and parks have caught the attention of the committee and that it has an important role to play in the ongoing debate.

"It's important to have a venue in which to express the concerns of citizens," he said. "I know some people would be concerned about that going forward, but we'll just have to wait and see what happens."

The next DCNR Citizens Advisory Council meeting is scheduled for 10 a.m. Jan. 25 in Room 105 of the Rachel Carson State Office Building in Harrisburg.

Don Hopey: [dhopey@post-gazette.com](mailto:dhopey@post-gazette.com) or 412-263-1983.

First published on January 16, 2012 at 12:00 am

More from Post-Gazette.com	More from the Web (sponsored)
<a href="#">Arians says: 'No choice but to leave'</a>	<a href="#">The Healthiest Fruit You Don't Know About</a> (Eat Better America)
<a href="#">1 woman killed, 1 hurt in Mansfield Bridge crash</a>	<a href="#">Unthinkable Poised to Happen on Wall Street. See Disturbing Charts.</a> (Moneynews)
<a href="#">The Food Column: McDonald's debuts new Happy Meal</a>	<a href="#">Forget Oil... This Could Be the Biggest Story in Energy</a> (Street Authority)
<a href="#">Bottom Dollar Food to open 7 area stores on Thursday</a>	<a href="#">What's Behind the Gas Boom?</a> (Txchnologist)
<a href="#">Steelers have OB issues for offseason</a>	<a href="#">Pinterest for Brands: 5 Hot Tips</a> (OPEN Forum)
	<a href="#">[what's this]</a>