



Rick Steiner

Truth and Consequences on the Last Frontier

Professor Rick Steiner who, since before the Exxon Valdez disaster has been known as a critic of the oil industry and a defender of marine conservation, has resigned from the University of Alaska.

The university had stripped him of a NOAA grant because of his outspoken opposition to offshore oil development in the Bristol Bay region. Steiner filed a grievance and, in October, lost. He then resigned.

Here's why.

One of the first things I learned as a kid was to tell the truth, and one of the next things I learned was that some people just don't want to hear it.

As a marine conservation professor at the University of Alaska for 30 years, my job was to seek and teach the truth, and put science to work in ocean conservation. But in a state that has become so dependent on oil money, telling the truth about the risks of oil is itself risky business.

University administrators had warned me for years not to "advocate" conservation, and not to "criticize state government as that is where we get our money." As a tenured professor, I ignored such warnings, thinking that I was protected from retaliation. But for telling my truth about the risks of offshore oil, retaliate they did, and I recently was forced to resign.

Since the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, I've worked around the world on risks and impacts of oil in coastal environments. So, when asked by conservation colleagues to offer my perspective on the proposed offshore oil and gas lease sale in Bristol Bay, I did so without reservation. I signed a letter and joined a press conference challenging a 2008 symposium, sponsored by Shell oil and Alaska Sea Grant, designed to show "how oil and fish can co-exist" in Bristol Bay (North Aleutian Basin). We felt the symposium asked the wrong questions, had the wrong participants, and advocated a pro-drilling decision.

And here is truth I then spoke concerning "how oil and fish can co-exist" in Bristol Bay:

They can't. The area proposed for offshore drilling is one of the most productive marine ecosystems in the world, supporting some of the most abundant populations of marine mammals, seabirds, crab, bottom fish, and salmon anywhere. The combined impacts and risks of noise, habitat damage, operational discharges, pipelines, terminals, and tanker traffic are enough reason to halt the project.

Add to this the substantial risk of a catastrophic spill, as in the recent platform blowout off northwest Australia, and the no-lease decision is a "no-brainer." Some ocean areas are too precious to expose to such risk. Bristol Bay is such a place, and we said so.



A state-of-the-art petroleum platform blew out, caught fire, and spilled off the north coast of Australia. It took crews 74 days to stop gas and oil from flowing into the Timor Sea.

After I raised these concerns, university administrators met with senior officials at NOAA headquarters and agreed to punish me by terminating the Sea Grant funding I'd had for 30 years. They said, they "had a problem" with me and my environmental "advocacy," and that I could "cause problems nationally."

A university administrator criticized me for the concerns I raised about the Shell/Sea Grant conference, and informed me that because I "regularly take strong public positions on issues of public debate," my NOAA grant would be terminated. (Their offer of state funding for one year was a clumsy, irrelevant distraction. The problem is not the money, but rather the adverse action itself.)

As far as we know, this is the first time ever that a university faculty member lost federal funding because of public comments. As for "advocacy," all faculty advocate, but the unspoken rule here is that it

is OK to advocate industrial development but not conservation. The Shell/Sea Grant oil conference was a perfect example. The University of Alaska receives, directly and indirectly, about \$300 million per year in oil money, and obviously that kind of money buys considerable favor and influence.

Ironically, when NOAA released its new position on offshore leasing last fall, it had come full-circle and agreed with the concerns we raised a year earlier, concluding that the Bristol Bay lease sale should be canceled because the region was too precious to place at risk from offshore oil development.

Nevertheless, a deliberate decision had already been made in the university to force me out. (As an added incentive they terminated my office lease). It was clear I could no longer do my conservation work freely within this repressive university environment. Thus, the only option to continue my work was to resign.

Free speech is unequivocal – either you have it, or you don't. What we've learned from my case is that at the University of Alaska, when it comes to criticisms of certain powerful industrial interests, we don't. That the university is pandering to its political and financial benefactors by punishing me for speaking a truth, which these benefactors consider threatening, is a stinging indictment of the integrity of this institution.

And while university administrators may be getting high-fives down at the Petroleum Club and the well-oiled Alaska Legislature for what they did here, they fail to appreciate the dark cloud their cowardly act leaves over the university and state.

NOAA, university administrators, and their industry puppet-masters know what they did here is wrong. Instead of celebrating, they would be well advised to heed a time-tested lesson of history – as the powerful seek to silence truth and dissent, truth and dissent only become more powerful. And that may be the ultimate reward for their shameful betrayal of public trust in my case. ♪

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