

2009 Prof. Steiner academic freedom case against University of Alaska

In 2008, when the federal government proposed an expansion of offshore oil development in the Arctic and Bristol Bay Alaska, Prof. Steiner raised public concerns about environmental risks of such projects, in particular major spills. Oil company officials met with university administrators, and told the university that the industry would no longer provide financial support to the university as long as Prof. Steiner continued to raise such concerns publicly. The single largest source of funding to the University of Alaska is oil revenue.

The written record shows that, as a result of Prof. Steiner's public environmental statements, in particular his concerns about the risks of oil development (which should have been legally protected by the university's academic freedom policy), the University of Alaska and NOAA terminated Steiner's NOAA grant funding. Federal officials wrote that they "had an issue" with Steiner," and that Steiner's public environmental statements could "cause problems nationally" for the agency. This was one of first cases in the nation where a university and federal agency *admitted* to eliminating a faculty member's funding specifically due to environmental concerns expressed by the faculty member.

Steiner filed internal grievances in 2009, but the university rejected them. Thus, Prof. Steiner resigned on principle from the university faculty in Feb. 2010 – just two months prior to the *Deepwater Horizon* offshore disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The federal administration ultimately withdrew the Bristol Bay / North Aleutian Basin offshore oil lease from further consideration, just as Steiner had originally recommended.

<http://www.peer.org/news/news-releases/2010/02/03/international-scientists-condemn-purge-of-professor/>

Opinion/editorials re: Steiner academic freedom case.

Anchorage Daily News

Here's a source for objective data

(2/11/09)

On specialized technical issues like environmental impacts, the public depends critically on experts to keep us informed. Government employees should do that. But all too often they are muzzled by political correctness. We must often turn to academics for objective information.

At least since the Exxon Valdez oil spill, UA professor Dr. Rick Steiner has played a key role in informing us about risks from a wide range of marine impacts. This has

included exposure of government officials failing to implement legal requirements or failing to understand scientific findings.

One case is Gov. Sarah Palin's misinterpretation of ADF&G conclusions and stating that polar bears are not in jeopardy. Other cases include impacts to the Bristol Bay fishery and to Cook Inlet belugas.

UA President Mark Hamilton has spoken eloquently about liberal arts education as an education in the arts of liberty. I hope he will put that ideal into action and support Dr. Steiner and other faculty members in fulfilling the university's public trust.

-- *Stephen Stringham, Soldotna*

Science advocates sorely needed

(3/10/09)

You would think the University of Alaska and the federal government would reward Rick Steiner for his efforts to prevent oil spills and deal with clean-ups after spills occur. But instead they want to punish him by revoking his Sea Grant funding ("UA professor in danger of losing federal funding," ADN March 8).

Academic freedom aside, scientist-advocates play a vital role in countering industry efforts to avoid environmental responsibilities. Who better to inform the public of these risks than a qualified expert with the guts to speak out?

Alaska's marine resources are priceless. We need more effort by Steiner to protect them, not less. If he loses federal funding it will have a chilling effect on his university colleagues and no one will dare to serve as a truth-teller.

-- *Vic Van Ballenberghe, Anchorage*

Controversial UAA professor deserves support of state COMPASS: *Other points of view*

(3/14/09)

By JONATHAN WILLS

I read with dismay the March 7 article about the attempt to deprive University of Alaska professor Rick Steiner of his Sea Grant funding. I have known and worked with Steiner for 20 years and have personally witnessed his commitment to science and the protection of the environment.

To give just a few examples:

In April 1989 he was one of the first people (outside of the oil industry) to figure out that if Alaska had enjoyed the environmental safeguards funded by the same oil

companies at Sullom Voe in the Shetland Islands, the Exxon Valdez spill would probably not have happened -- because the ship's deviation from her track would have been detected automatically from shore and alarms would have gone off.

Steiner immediately organized a trip to Shetland and returned with a detailed plan based on global best practice and best available technology for vessel traffic systems. He then became a leading force in setting up the Prince William Sound Regional Citizens' Advisory Council, whose achievements are justifiably famous worldwide.

When the Braer, a passing tanker unconnected with Sullom Voe, broke down off the Shetland coast in 1993 and spilled twice as much oil as the Exxon Valdez, Steiner was on the next plane over here to offer our local authorities his practical assistance and expert advice. This was greatly appreciated. He later did similar volunteer work for oil spill-affected communities in Japan, Korea and the Baltic, among other places.

In 1999 I had the great pleasure of working with Steiner and Dan Lawn of Valdez on a review of environmental protection plans for the new offshore oil fields in Sakhalin on the coast of the Russian Far East. Steiner's meticulous approach to research ensured that our recommendations were based on facts and were of practical use to the fishermen and coastal communities in that impoverished region. He has since carried out many similarly useful projects for citizens' groups and fishermen's organizations in other parts of the world including Indonesia and West Africa.

His partnership with Alaska fishermen and environmental agencies is well known in your country, not just during the protracted oil spill crisis but also during three decades of work to promote sustainable fishing techniques.

Now, it's true that Steiner is a man of strong opinions. In his published papers and lectures he takes a stance on issues. He has no time for the pretence of academic "objectivity" -- all too often a cloak for timidity and conformism.

What he says may not be welcome or popular with the high and mighty but it's always fair. When the oil industry get it right he's usually among the first to compliment them.

In my experience his positions are invariably argued in forensic detail, from a clear and unbiased examination of the evidence. That, of course, is what professors are supposed to do. It may not make them easy colleagues for the bean counters and paper shufflers to work alongside, but it's what we pay them for: to examine, to challenge and to provoke discussion.

I know how well Steiner is regarded in the state of Alaska by the many, many people whose lives he has enriched by his commitment to social and environmental responsibility, his intelligence, practical help and his wonderful gift of humor in adversity. What Alaskans may not realize is what a great ambassador Steiner has been in the wider world -- for his university, his home state and the U.S., whose finest academic traditions he exemplifies. I do hope the authorities will realize their folly and abandon this crude attempt at stifling academic freedom before they make complete donkeys of themselves.

Jonathan Wills lives in Scotland, where he is independent councillor for Lerwick South, Shetland Islands Council. He made the 1990 British TV documentary "Slick

Operators" about the Exxon Valdez oil spill and later worked with professor Steiner as an environmental consultant.

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UA fails to support faculty who are critical of industry (3/18/09)

I fully endorse the views of my fellow Scot, Jonathan Wills, in his March 14 Compass piece "Controversial UA professor deserves support of state," which was responding to the March 8 article "UA professor in danger of losing federal funding."

In 1994, in my capacity as British honorary consul for Alaska, I was approached by the World Wildlife Fund to set up briefings in Anchorage on the long-term impact of the Exxon Valdez oil spill for their then-president, HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. I called on the expertise of my UA colleague Rick Steiner, who set up a superb forum bringing together all the best scientific understanding and projections.

I have followed his presentations and publications ever since and know him to be a scientist of unquestioned integrity, but it is typical of the University of Alaska system under its current leadership not to support its faculty if their views are critical of industry.

This was most recently clearly illustrated by UA President Mark Hamilton's response to Rep. Anna Fairclough during the Finance Committee's hearings on the University of Alaska budget, when he sought to reassure her that the faculty was "the most conservative anywhere" and that UA students "would mature" -- presumably to conservative views.

As a long-time member of the UAA faculty, I was outraged to have President Hamilton falsely vouch for my political views and those of my faculty colleagues. Whatever happened to academic freedom? Do we want the University of Alaska system to just finish up as a vocational college, obediently training technicians for identified industry slots, and with every publicly funded university structure bearing the name of companies or donors?

Certainly Rick Steiner represents the finest progressive conservationist thinking that will lead to sustainable development. He does not need to have President Hamilton for reasons of expediency apologizing for his views before the Legislature, nor have his dean for similar reasons cutting him off from grant funding. Such behavior only prostitutes the university to corrupt political and corporate interests.

It is a new day in Washington, D.C. Let us hope it soon dawns in the University of Alaska system and in Juneau.

-- *Diddy R.M. Hitchins, professor emerita, UAA*

Steiner treatment appalling (3/19/09)

The case of University of Alaska professor Rick Steiner's lost grant funding is weird and sickening in this 20th anniversary year of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Steiner stood as one of the spill's authentic heroes, and since has become a world-renowned expert on marine pollution and how to build community organizations that can prevent it. International agencies have sought his advice

in Mongolia, Lebanon and Papua New Guinea, among many other places, and have paid his way in spreading lessons learned in Alaska.

But back home, Steiner stands accused of bias by officials in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Sea Grant Program. Their evidence? That he pointed out pro-oil bias at their own conference promoting drilling in Bristol Bay.

Leaving aside the Orwellian logic of this attack, and leaving aside, as well, the damage to the integrity of our university if a professor can lose funding for speaking his mind, consider what it means on this anniversary for the federal government to be silencing those who seek to protect the sea from oil spills. Twenty years ago we were failed, first and foremost, by our institutions, especially our governments. Many of us swore we wouldn't let it happen again. Professor Steiner's situation suggests we've already forgotten that promise.

-- Charles Wohlforth, Anchorage

Letter to UA Board of Regents

(3/8/09)

Rick Steiner and I go back many years. He was driving a small boat around the Copper River flats in the early 80's or late 70's doing sea lion studies when I met him. Rick Steiner is as green as spinach. I do not always agree with his point of view but I always listen to what he has to say. Rick Steiner will tell the truth. When was telling the truth a reason to punish someone at UAF. I am an alumnus from your university. My son is now a junior in high school. We are now searching for colleagues for him to attend. I am pulling UAF off the short list because I would not want my son to attend a university that was muzzled by the oil companies. Many people were displeased with what Rick Steiner said but nobody called him a liar.

This is the first time I am ashamed to tell anyone I graduated from UAF.

Erwin Samuelson, Cordova

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<http://www.adn.com/opinion/story/6745812p-6633788c.html>

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University free speech

Professor should suffer no restraint on expressing views

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It sure looked like Mark Hamilton, president of the University of Alaska, settled this issue four years ago. Now the question of free speech comes up at the university again.

Rick Steiner, a professor in the University of Alaska's Marine Advisory Program, wants a transfer because he says he was pressured by a superior to curb his criticism of state efforts to clean up the Selendang Ayu oil spill.

The superior, Denis Wiesenburg, dean of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences, said he advised Mr. Steiner to work "within the system," that they were paid by the state. Mr. Wiesenburg's concerns were prompted by calls from Department of Environmental Conservation official Larry Dietrick, who wanted to know if Mr. Steiner's endorsement of a report that took the state to task reflected the university's position.

There needn't be any fuss here. Here's what Mr. Hamilton wrote in a memorandum in March 2001:

"Opinions expressed ... don't have to be politic or polite. However personally offended we might be, however unfair the association of the University to the opinion might be, I insist that we remain a certain trumpet on this most precious of Constitutional rights." Soon after the memorandum went out, Mr. Hamilton said "This is a university. We allow ideas to be expressed. That's what happens."

The state's nickel shouldn't muzzle anybody. Citizens, reporters, private and public groups commonly ask for comments and advice from university professors precisely because they are university professors; that standing means they have, or should have, valuable knowledge and opinions about the subject of inquiry.

Both Mr. Wiesenburg and Brian Allee, who directs the Alaska Sea Grant Program at the university, said they support Mr. Steiner's right to work without or outside of the system and to criticize as he sees fit. But they want him to make clear when he's speaking as an individual and when he's speaking on behalf of the university.

On the face of it, that seems fair -- but wait a minute. We ask a university prof for his or her views based on his or her expertise; we don't ask them for an official view from the university establishment. If an individual prof wants to make that disclaimer, fine. But it's up to university officials to communicate the official line if there is one. The professor is responsible for his or her opinion, no others.

Freedom of expression and ideas takes precedence here. If Rick Steiner feels he's doing his professional best in endorsing a report critical of the state, so be it. State officials don't have to like it and certainly don't have to take it; let them make their case in opposition. If that includes fierce criticism of the report or Mr. Steiner's views, so be it. Free speech -- but not necessarily comfort in exercising it -- is what Mr. Hamilton rightly guaranteed at the university.

But any implication, intended or not, that state money requires any professor to trim criticism of the state is bad news -- antithetical to what a university should be.

There's an old saying that some invoke: "Take the king's shilling, do the king's bidding."

That's true sometimes. But this is not a monarchy. There is no king. And the money

comes from Alaskans, who expect the university to use our money well, and its professors to speak freely.

BOTTOM LINE: No trimming on freedom of speech at the university.