



Michigan COMMENTARY

Russell J. Harding: A Profile

by Steve Harrington
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Guarding Michigan's air and surface water quality and managing the Environmental Response and Waste Management divisions are two of the most difficult jobs in the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Last month, Russell J. Harding accepted those responsibilities when he was named deputy director for environmental protection. It is a job he sees as a tremendous challenge in a state that is heavily dependent on its exceptional natural resources.

Harding's appointment as deputy director came as a surprise to many because he had been with the department as chief of the DNR's Parks Division for only 18 months. In that time, however, he quickly gained a reputation as a dynamic administrator never satisfied with the status quo. If his tenure as the parks chief is any indication, some of the DNR's most important and visible programs are likely to undergo significant changes. "I'm the type of person who is always looking for ways to improve the system," Harding says. "Our biggest challenges will be to expedite the clean ups of contaminated sites and reduce the permit backlogs."

Although Harding came to the position with ideas on how to improve the state's environmental protection programs, he believes in first obtaining as much background information as possible. When he headed the Parks Division, one of his first tasks was to visit each of the state's 94 parks and recreation areas. As deputy director, he is spending his first weeks familiarizing himself with the divisions under his authority: Surface Water Quality, Air Quality, Waste Management, and Environmental Response. He is particularly interested in talking with staff at all levels. "You only lead if your people allow you to," he says. "Implementation of any changes can have tremendous effects on employees. It is important to understand their needs and concerns."

When budget cuts in the Parks Division caused the transfer or loss of about 100 employees, Harding understood the turmoil such changes can create. Those who know him saw Harding agonize over difficult decisions that uprooted families or caused some employees to quit or retire from the department. "When difficult decisions are required it is best to make them as quickly as possible. The uncertainty can be devastating. We have a duty to end that uncertainty as quickly as possible to enable employees to adjust," he says.

Leaving the Parks Division was bittersweet for Harding. While he saw his staff quickly regain morale and direction, Harding does not like leaving behind the strategic planning initiative he started. Vision 2020 involves committees of DNR staff, representatives of various interest groups, and the public. It is an ambitious look at the future of Michigan's state parks and addresses such issues as funding, acquisition, disposal, and programming. Harding said he expects the initiative to be completed without his guidance, but it is difficult to imagine him undertaking such an extensive program without keeping tabs on it through completion.

Just as Harding drew on a variety of people for Vision 2020, he is expected to seek similar input on environmental protection programs. "We have some tough management decisions ahead of us, and the regulated industries must have input if we are to implement changes," Harding says. "We must also have the input of citizens. I believe the general public, once provided with the facts, possesses an incredible amount of common sense and generally makes the correct decisions."

Although Harding recognizes that budget realities must be balanced against an increasing load of federally mandated environmental regulations, he believes in a strong compliance program. "We must have fair and consistent enforcement," Harding says. "We must also be watchful for innovative resolutions and be sure responsible parties are penalized."

When it comes to environmental cleanups, Harding is hopeful that new technologies will play a larger role. He also believes that the private sector may become more involved in contaminated site cleanups. "Our staff is already spread thin and simply does not have the time to manage every cleanup. It is possible that these kinds of duties may be contracted, depending upon the circumstances," he says. "Whatever we do must be balanced against the public trust function of state government, but I am a big fan of private sector involvement when it is appropriate."

Harding also believes DNR staff can be made more effective by using teams of professionals that foster an ecosystem approach to environmental protection. Instead of sending DNR staff separately to investigate sites, Harding favors a team inspection so that professionals from different divisions can discuss issues immediately and make decisions more quickly and effectively.

"We also must look at decentralizing functions," Harding says. "Currently, our environmental protection programs are centralized, and much of the decision making has been removed from the field staff. We need to reverse that so that field staff is more responsible for the decisions and looks to Lansing for policy guidance." Harding said that he already has sent memos to division chiefs asking them to identify areas that could be candidates for decentralization.

Another approach to environmental protection Harding favors is pollution prevention. "This is a concept that makes a great deal of sense. Instead of spending limited financial and human resources to clean up a mess, it is obviously better to avoid the mess in the first place," he says. "Perhaps we need financial incentives, such as tax credits for facilities that go beyond the minimum protection efforts and tax penalties for polluters."

Although Harding would like to see the permit backlog reduced, he says it is a mistake to think that that means sacrificing environmental protection in the process. "We can have both," he says. "It may not come easily, but there is considerable potential to improve the current system." Harding said that his personal view of his position prevents him from backsliding on environmental protection. "I'm paid to address environmental concerns and that is what I will do. The public ought to expect accountability—especially when tough decisions are involved," he says.

The recently completed Michigan Relative Risk Analysis Project (RRAP) may provide some useful guidance on environmental protection priorities, according to Harding, who participated in the project. The RRAP used committees of scientists, agency representatives, and citizens to examine scientific data and then identify and rank the state's most pressing environmental issues. The RRAP was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, administered by the DNR, and staffed by Public Sector Consultants.

"We need more science-based decision making," Harding says. "Too often in the past our priorities have been set by public reaction to news media coverage. Environmental issues are often complex, scientists don't always agree, and we must look at the relative costs and benefits when we use limited financial resources."

Harding recognizes the problems of the past and present, and he is one to look to the future as well. He says that implementing the federal Clean Air Act amendments will pose a considerable challenge. Other federal regulations may also present new responsibilities to the state's environmental protection programs and, too often, there are no additional funds to handle those new responsibilities, according to Harding.

Another environmental protection challenge may be presented by the economy. "The biggest threat to the environment is a poor economy," Harding says. "It is at these times when we are tempted to cut corners. Eastern Europe is a good example of how dangerous a poor economy can be to environmental quality."

Harding admits that he often looks at problems differently from many people. He says he sees opportunities for improvement instead of ways to maintain the status quo and is optimistic that his ambitious goals will be met with the help of his enthusiastic, young staff.

His short tenure with the DNR is not an accurate measure of his ability to perform as a deputy director, Harding says. "I've spent more than twenty years getting ready for this position. My background is diverse, and that helps me look at problems with different perspectives and find new solutions."

Harding spent much of his growing-up years near Grand Rapids and attended high school in Arizona. He earned a B.S. degree in geology from Northern Arizona University and has held a series of management positions in Arizona, Alaska, and Missouri since 1975. Before returning to Michigan, he was deputy director for the Missouri DNR's Environmental Quality Division for two years. Throughout most of his career Russ Harding has been tapped by DNR directors to participate in or lead a variety of task forces and organizational improvement initiatives.

Despite having "one of the most difficult jobs in state government," Harding says his personal life is unlikely to change much. "I have to balance my personal life with work, and it is a balance I have struck in the past," he says. Harding is married and has a 13-year-old son and a 16-year-old daughter. He enjoys church activities as well as hiking, biking, and tennis.

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