Health professional recruitment set to expand

Good news: A state-led program is working well. This one helps recruit and retain health care professionals in Alaska. It has been successful in its first two rounds and is now poised for expansion. The program, "Supporting Healthcare Access (through loan) Repayment Program" or SHARP, is administered by the Dept. of Health and Social Services, and has helped attract physicians, dentists, behavioral health and other specialists in short supply, particularly to small communities. These are professionals who leave school with hefty education loans, and where SHARP can pay down their debt if they come to Alaska to practice. A big attraction is that the loan repayment is exempt from federal tax. Many states have similar programs and Alaska is actually late in the game. There are also direct cash incentives for experienced practitioners willing to serve in rural communities. Money is both for recruitment and retention of experienced health professionals.

Funding for the first two phases have come (in phase one) from a mix of federal grants, money from the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and employer matches; and (phase two) from state general funds and employer contributions. State funding is now gone because of the budget shortfall but employers will pick up a larger share of funding in an expansion planned later this year. It depends on a new federal grant, but that is anticipated. Since 2010 there have been 254 practitioners helped, almost all in primary care. In rural areas the program has helped stabilize local staffing and cut down on the hiring of temporary health specialists, called "travelers," who are very expensive.

Yet another expansion is in the planning stage. This would broaden the occupations recruited beyong primary care to other professionals also in short supply like hospital administrators, drug and alcohol counselors. It would also to recruit for health employers in larger, not just smaller, communities. This phase would be largely employer-funded but the program would still be administered by the state.

State oil and gas regulators want deep pockets to go after on well cleanups

The Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, the quasi-judicial state regulatory commission that oversees oil production safety and reservoir management practices, is recommending new legislation that would allow liability for well repairs and rehabilitation at an abandonment to spread to former owners of an oil and gas producing property if a current owner cannot pay the costs. Two states, California and Kansas, have such provisions in law as backups, Hollis French, chair of the AOGCC, told the House Resources Committee March 5.

The Commission's "best guess" of average well cleanup is $600,000 but this can vary widely depending on the proximity of roads, or the remoteness of the site, French said. Bonds currently posted by operating companies range between $100,000 and $200,000 but the bond amount is not that important. What's more important, French said, is to have "deep pockets" to go after if a small, thinly-capitalized company abandons a well and can't pay the costs. AOGCC's current policy is that the ultimate reponsibility for cleanup resides with the landowner, but in Alaska the state itself is the landowner on most producing properties.