

## **Agrium task force named**

**By MARK QUINER**

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Gov. Frank Murkowski announced the members of an Agrium task force Wednesday aimed at assisting employees losing jobs and exploring ways to spur economic development in the Cook Inlet basin, said Murkowski spokesperson Becky Hultberg.

The following people were named to the group: Bill Popp, oil and gas liaison for the Kenai Peninsula Borough; Gary Superman, president of the borough assembly; Bob Swenson, deputy director of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources oil and gas division; Bill Noll, deputy commissioner at the Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development; Greg O'Claray, commissioner of the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development; Bob Favretto, owner of Kenai Chrysler; Roy Wells, president of the Kenai Chamber of Commerce and a financial advisor affiliated with Waddell and Reed Financial Services Inc.; Pat Cowan, co-owner of Birch Ridge Golf Course Resort in Soldotna; Jim Carter, former executive director of Cook Inlet Regional Citizens Advisory Council; George Ford, former plant manager when it was owned by Unocal Corp.; and Rick Ross, Kenai City Council member.

Hultberg said the city of Soldotna and Agrium have been invited to appoint task force members. They had not announced anyone as of Wednesday evening.

Soldotna Mayor Dave Carey expects Soldotna will participate in the task force. Agrium also plans to participate, said spokesperson Lisa Parker.

Hultberg said Sen. Tom Wagoner and Reps. Mike Chenault and Kurt Olson will serve as nonvoting members.

"The task force is going to focus on assistance to the employees and ways to spur the economy through new oil and gas development," Hultberg said.

She expects the group to meet in the next couple of weeks.

The Department of Commerce will facilitate the group, she said, adding that the department of labor also will play a key role.

Agrium announced last year that it is closing its North Kenai fertilizer plant because it is unable to secure a cheap steady supply of natural gas. Gas is a key ingredient in the production of ammonia and urea, the products manufactured at the plant.

Originally, Murkowski said he would name a task force to examine ways to prevent the plant's closure.

In a January interview, Hultberg said due to strong statements from Agrium that the plant is closing, the scope of the task force changed. This caused a delay in naming the group, she said.

"I'm looking forward to seeing what guidance comes to the group from Agrium and the governor," said Ross, a task force member.

He said it is important for both to be a strong voice in the process.

Mark Schams, an Agrium employee, gave his support to the group and said he is hopeful the group will explore some viable options for Agrium employees and to spur economic development in the area. He said he hopes Agrium will appoint an employee that has longstanding ties to the community and plans to stay.

"I think the task force will offer something (to the community)," he said.