

Unpopular Lake Valley fire chief leaving

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Valley Fire Protection District's divisive fire chief is about to be without a job.

Gareth Harris has had a tempestuous tenure as chief. Twice he had unanimous votes of no confidence from firefighters. Key staff has been looking to leave because the morale is so lousy. Finally, the board had enough.



Gareth Harris

While the official letter sent by board Chairman Bob Bettencourt to staff said Harris is retiring, those close to the situation told *Lake Tahoe News* the chief was told to leave.

Harris' last day on the payroll is Aug. 1, however he will be gone at the end of the month. Bettencourt described it as being "on leave beginning July 1."

When Harris was hired in 2005 from the Half Moon Bay Fire District as battalion chief and fire marshal for Lake Valley he was the first hire at that level outside of the department. But he came with baggage. According to news reports from Half Moon Bay, Harris was accused of harassment by a subordinate that ended in a settlement agreement.

The 54-year-old became chief in summer 2011. Harris replaced popular and well-respected **Fire Chief Jeff Michael**. Michael had been with the Lake Valley department for 32 years. He is being brought back in to be interim chief starting July 1.

Bettencourt in a letter to Lake Valley staff that was obtained by *LTV*, said, Michael's hire is "to assist the district with the issues we are facing at the current time."

Harris has been described as lazy as well as a bully.

Harris was the subject of 2014 El Dorado County **Grand Jury report** regarding selling radio equipment to the department he worked for. California Government Code prohibits employees from having any financial interest in any contract made by them or in their official capacity.

Harris did not return a phone call.