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Judge voids firing of Gunpowder Falls assistant manager



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A Baltimore County Circuit Court judge reversed the termination of an [assistant manager at Gunpowder Falls State Park](#), ruling that the Maryland Department of Natural Resources did not follow proper procedures when it terminated his employment amid a widening investigation into the agency's workplace culture. In a written decision issued Jan. 30, Judge Thomas R. Tompsett Jr. overturned Dean Hughes' Nov. 10, 2022, termination.

The judge concluded that the department failed to comply with state law governing who has the authority to discipline or dismiss employees at the Kingsville park. Hughes, who was initially hired as a state park ranger assistant manager in 2015, had faced allegations of "bullying" and making "inappropriate sexual comments toward subordinate employees," according to Tompsett's order.

Josh Kurtz, secretary of the state's DNR, wrote in a statement to The Baltimore Sun that he was "extremely disappointed" with the ruling, maintaining that the termination was "appropriate and lawful."

"The court's decision in this case rested on a perceived technical defect, and the court did not make any rulings about Hughes' potential reinstatement or other relief," the statement reads. "The court did not overturn any of the fact findings of the Administrative Law Judge regarding the behavior of Mr. Hughes, which were appropriate grounds for his termination."

Hughes' Greenbelt-based attorney, Timothy Maloney, said in a statement: "In the rush to find scapegoats, DNR suspended due process and decapitated the top leadership of the park service. As the court correctly found, Mr. Hughes was denied the basic procedural safeguards that most state employees are entitled to."

Maloney argued in court that DNR failed to meet with him before his termination, did not adequately investigate the allegations and did not provide proper notice or explanation of the evidence against him.

Tompsett agreed, writing that the department "failed to scrupulously observe its own rules and regulations" and that both Hughes' termination and the administrative law judge's decision affirming it could not stand.

The ruling comes amid fallout from the [criminal case of Gunpowder Falls Park Manager Michael Browning](#) and broader allegations of harassment, bullying and abuse of power in the Maryland Park Service in 2022. Browning, then 71, was arrested in September 2022 on charges that he raped a former seasonal employee over several months. A second woman later came forward with similar allegations. In April 2023, [a jury convicted Browning of one misdemeanor fourth-degree sex offense after a five-day trial](#), acquitting him of 17 other charges, including second-degree rape and assault. He was sentenced to two years of unsupervised probation and was ordered register as a sex offender for 15 years.

According to court records, DNR officials alleged that Hughes went to Browning's residence while state law enforcement equipment was being inventoried and retrieved. Authorities say Hughes recovered a state-issued cellphone and a bag of items from Browning's park ranger vehicle and retained them. Officials also alleged that Hughes made an emotional appeal to other staff to support Browning, despite being instructed not to comment on the arrest.

Tompsett's ruling addressed only the process of Hughes' termination and the legal authority of the officials involved. The decision did not weigh the underlying allegations that prompted the personnel action, nor did it assess Hughes' conduct.

Nita Settina, who became superintendent of the state parks system in 2008 after 15 years with the Department of Natural Resources and experience lobbying for the Sierra Club and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, [left the agency in April 2022](#) amid the fallout with Browning. Regional manager Steve McCoy also departed. DNR did not provide further details on their exits.

Kurtz said the DNR is consulting with the attorney general's office about next steps, adding, "The well-being of DNR staff is our paramount concern and all decisions in this matter will be made toward supporting staff and visitors to public lands."

Gunpowder Falls State Park spans more than 18,000 acres across Baltimore and Harford counties and is among Maryland's most heavily visited parks, attracting more than 1 million visitors annually, according to the DNR.

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