

# GOP wants to shrink environmental agency

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*PUBLISHED IN: STATE*

**RALEIGH** -- There is a move in the Republican-controlled legislature to downsize and make more business-friendly the state's leading environmental agency, a move that has set off alarms among environmentalists.

A measure moving through the Senate would strip the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) of several of its functions. And Senate budget writers are considering further downsizing measures.

Lawmakers have also begun holding hearings across the state to review the state's rules and regulations, with environmental regulations a particular area of interest.

"I'd like to see DENR downsized," said Sen. Don East, a Republican from Pilot Mountain and co-chairman of the budget committee that controls DENR's purse strings.

"I'd like to see them be a kinder, gentler agency. I'd like to see DENR be a help, not a hindrance to business and industry."

The Republican push is likely to win some backing in the business community, but it has caused concern among environmentalists and their allies.

"What I perceive is a generalized attack on all parts of DENR," said Joe Hackney of Chapel Hill, the House Democratic leader, who has longtime ties to the environmental movement. "There are some people who want to dismantle it and reduce it to little or nothing. There are others who want to neuter its regulatory side, which the public will not like. The public places a high value on clean water and clean air."

Environmental regulation has long been a target of conservatives, particularly in Washington, where Republicans often portray the Environmental Protection Agency as overreaching.

## The agency

The department, known as DENR, oversees a host of special agencies and programs as well as 20 divisions, including waste management, coastal management, air quality, water quality, marine fisheries and environmental health.

It also offers technical assistance to businesses, farmers, local governments, and runs some federal environmental programs.

DENR has a total staff of about 3,800 workers.

Legislators are considering moving some of DENR's divisions to other state agencies.

For instance, the forestry division (674 employees) and soil and water conservation (58 employees) would be placed under the Department of Agriculture, which now has 1,293 employees.

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In North Carolina, many federal environmental regulations - as well as the state regulations - are managed by DENR.

The debate comes at a time when the state faces a \$2.4 billion budget shortfall for the fiscal year beginning July 1, and lawmakers want to reorganize state government as a way to save money. Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue announced her own reorganization plan in December, and she is expected to put elements of that plan into place shortly.

## Moving divisions

The Senate is considering two bills that would move divisions of DENR - forestry and soil and water conservation - to the state Department of Agriculture. That agency is controlled by Republican Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler.

East said both divisions fit well with the mission of the agriculture department, reducing duplication.

He said the idea of moving the forestry division to agriculture was first proposed by the N.C. Forestry Association, the trade group that represents the state's timber industry, professional foresters, landowners and others.

Bob Slocum, executive vice president of the forestry association, said the move has been discussed for at least 20 years. He noted DENR had developed primarily into a regulatory agency and that the forestry division is more involved in fire protection and dealing with insects and disease.

"It just seems like to us its a far more natural fit," Slocum said.

But Sam Pearsall, an official with the Environmental Defense Fund, said he was concerned that a move would shift the division's focus from forest management to marketing, which is one of the chief missions of the agriculture department.

"I do worry that moving the division of forest resources will change the focus from making our forests the best in the country to cranking out forest products," Pearsall said.

Dee Freeman, the DENR secretary, tread carefully on the issue, saying he was working with legislative leaders "to find a reasonable common-sense solution."

The Senate committee has also been looking at breaking off other parts of DENR, including moving Marine Fisheries and Parks and Recreation to the Wildlife Resources Commission and moving the aquariums, natural science museum and zoo to the state commerce department.



**2001 N&O File photo - CHRIS SEWARD**

Technician Jim Brown takes a water sample in Caswell County. Water quality is a responsibility of the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

East said he didn't think there was time to shift those divisions this session, and they would likely be considered in a study committee between legislative sessions.

## Rules examined

North Carolina's environmental laws also are coming under scrutiny at hearings being held by legislature's Joint Committee on Regulatory Reform. The first was Monday in Charlotte. Four others are scheduled on Mondays in April.

Among those who appeared before the committee Monday, East said, was former sports announcer Billy Packer, now a land developer, who talked about his frustrations of dealing with DENR.

"Of the many, many complaints I get from business and developers, home builders and land clearers, and landfill operators, 90 percent are about DENR and about the onerous regulations and unfriendly attitude," East said.

East predicted an effort to roll back some rules and regulations that are more stringent than required by the federal government.

A coalition of environmental groups met last week with House Speaker Thom Tillis of Mecklenburg County. The coalition is drafting a letter asking that any regulation review leave the state's basic protections of air and water unharmed.

Hackney said DENR has done a good job of running the federal environmental programs that are delegated to the states. If the state programs are cut too much, the federal government will end up taking over the program, and people will have to go to the regional EPA office in Atlanta for permits.

"That is not good for business in North Carolina," Hackney said. "I just hope any review will be done thoughtfully and the governor will resist any unwise changes."

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