

Soul-Crushing Takeover of NC DENR Brings Resignation

I never planned to leave state government. I loved my job at the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources. It was in my DNA, quite literally; both my parents were lifelong state employees, and I was the second generation of DENR employee in my family. My parents instilled in me a love of nature -- my father was a nautical man and took us sailing often, while my mother hails from western North Carolina, where we explored nearly every ridge and hollow along the Blue Ridge.

They also instilled in me a strong motivation to enter public service. Dedicating my career to the agency charged with protecting my home state's water, air and land for the public interest was a no-brainer. Unfortunately, so was quitting the agency this fall.

For years, DENR has been stretched thin, its programs underfunded, its staff overworked, yet we managed to adhere to our core mission, and to the personal dedication that drives many of us who work in state government. But this year's historic and hostile takeover of DENR by politically and ideologically motivated lawmakers in the General Assembly was soul-crushing. I could no longer clock in in good conscience that I could uphold my commitment to protect the environment.

Environmental regulators play an important role and have a huge responsibility. They must issue permits for industrial activities in a way that protects natural resources. They must ensure the state meets a variety of federal requirements. And at all times, they must balance assisting individual citizens, protecting the public resource, and holding polluters accountable.

These are not just empty bureaucratic exercises. What's at stake is nothing less than having clean water to drink, healthy streams in which to fish and swim, pure air to breathe, and green space where wildlife can thrive and where our children can play.

The General Assembly's legislation reorganizing DENR results in deep cuts to staff and resources.

The Division of Water Quality staff, for example, will likely be 24 percent smaller by March than it was in early 2011. "*Do more with less*" has become the mantra of upper management, but we in the ranks heard the message loud and clear: "*Do less. Period.*"

There are simply too few employees with too much territory to cover, both figuratively and literally, and the repercussions are real. Staff are increasingly tasked with duties for which they have no previous experience, such as reviewing complex technical pollution-control permit applications. Because state law requires DENR to issue permits within a tight deadline, staffers are under great pressure to essentially trust the industry's word that everything is in order. (The phrase "a fox guarding the hen house" comes to mind.) I did not sign on to my DENR job to wield a rubber stamp.

A permit is only as good as the enforcement behind it, but under such conditions, on-site inspections and compliance monitoring -- not required by law -- inevitably will go by the wayside. Even before the budget cuts, the water division was spread thin trying to do inspections on *thousands* of permits. If and when violations are found, I fear that DENR's new management will downplay or even overlook them.

Most importantly in my book, staff will not be as available to the public as in years past. Although customer service is a rallying cry of the current leadership, it seems that businesses and industry are considered the only "customers." As DENR Secretary John Skavarla told business leaders this year, his top priority is making environmental regulations more business friendly.

I had planned to spend my career at DENR, and would have encouraged my children to consider

public service as well. After the changes this year, and after much soul-searching, I decided to leave DENR. But not abandon it. My aim is to fight *for* the agency, for all the honest and dedicated employees under siege by the current administration and private interests vying for deregulation and personal gain. And to fight *for* every North Carolina citizen who values our state's amazing natural resources and wants them safeguarded for generations to come.

That's why I joined Appalachian Voices, a non-profit organization that helps give voice to people who care deeply about our natural heritage. I hope to inspire them to become more engaged in protecting the environment, including demanding accountability from our elected leaders to ensure that public servants, hired by taxpayer dollars, have the resources and support they need to do their job. Because, like me, they love North Carolina.

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<http://www.newsobserver.com/2013/12/15/3457917/soul-crushing-takeover-of-nc-denr.html>