

NC Department of Environmental Quality

2022 – 2024 STRATEGIC PLAN



*Providing science-based environmental stewardship
for the health and prosperity of all North Carolinians.*



A Message from the Secretary **Elizabeth S. Biser**

The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is the lead stewardship agency for the protection of North Carolina's environmental resources.

With offices from the mountains to the coast, DEQ administers regulatory programs designed to protect North Carolina's air, water, and land quality, the public's health, and works to advance an all-of-the-above energy strategy that fits the state's needs. DEQ also offers grants and technical assistance to businesses, farmers, local governments, and the public and encourages environmental stewardship through educational programs provided at DEQ facilities and through the state's school system.

Through a multitude of regulatory and non-regulatory programs, DEQ touches the lives of all North Carolinians in many ways to enhance and ensure our quality of life. These programs all serve different functions, but they work collaboratively in pursuit of a shared vision. It's important that our strategic plan, meant to be a set of guideposts for the agency over the next three years, reflects that integrated mindset.

DEQ's mission is to provide science-based environmental stewardship for the health and prosperity of all North Carolinians. To carry this out, it's crucial that we not only focus on our day-to-day functions and improve our current work, but also that we adjust as needed to a changing world and address the issues of the future. Over the last few years, there has been an increased need to adapt to new areas of concern and be creative to address new challenges. As we address these novel challenges, let's strive for innovative solutions and ensure that our processes are transparent, equitable, and inclusive.

I am so proud to be part of Team DEQ. Thank you for your dedication to the agency and to North Carolina. There is much work ahead, but I am confident in our ability to meet whatever challenges come our way.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Biser". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mission: Providing science-based environmental stewardship for the health and prosperity of all North Carolinians.

Vision: Our Department will be a leader in using collaborative, inclusive processes to solve pressing environmental issues.

Core Values:

Be **TRANSPARENT** and **ACCOUNTABLE** to uphold public trust

Seek **EQUITABLE** outcomes through **INCLUSIVE** processes

Lead with personal, professional, and scientific **INTEGRITY**

Pursue **LEARNING** and **INNOVATIVE** solutions

As a state agency, We will be **TRANSPARENT** and **ACCOUNTABLE** to uphold the public trust as we carry out our mission.

We will seek to be **EQUITABLE** and **INCLUSIVE** in our decision-making processes to ensure all voices are heard, including those that have been historically disadvantaged or with differing viewpoints.

We will hold ourselves to the highest standards of personal, professional, and scientific **INTEGRITY**.

We will maintain a **LEARNING** mindset and pursue **INNOVATIVE** solutions to complex issues.

Goals:

- 1) Promote and ensure environmental stewardship and provide technical, compliance, permit, and financial assistance to meet or exceed regulatory requirements and prevent pollution.
- 2) Create a working environment where employees are empowered to be active participants in developing science-based solutions to better protect public health and the environment.
- 3) Modernize and streamline internal processes to provide enhanced public service, increase transparency, and strengthen partnerships to better serve the people and businesses of North Carolina.
- 4) Ensure the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.
- 5) Address climate change impacts through engagement, accounting, mitigation efforts, and resiliency strategies that are equitable and just.
- 6) Protect North Carolinians from exposures to emerging compounds using a transparent and science-based decision-making process.
- 7) Strengthen North Carolina's infrastructure through thoughtful and strategic investments in communities.

Goal 1: Promote and ensure environmental stewardship and provide technical, compliance, permit, and financial assistance to meet or exceed regulatory requirements and prevent pollution.

NCDEQ is responsible across a wide spectrum of media (air, land, water) for regulatory oversight and certainty in the proper use and management of our environmental resources while holding those who violate our rules and regulations accountable for their actions. We must promote and ensure environmental stewardship, provide technical, compliance, permit, and financial assistance to permittees to meet or exceed regulatory requirements while simultaneously promoting and recognizing organizations and businesses who go beyond minimum compliance.

Objective A: Ensure the water quality for the people of North Carolina will be maintained and where possible enhanced through the standards and regulations set forth in state and federal statute.

Strategies

1.A.1 Provide technical water supply planning assistance through the continued collection of detailed annual data from water suppliers to better enable communities to resolve immediate and long-term water shortage issues.

1.A.2 Invest state and federal water infrastructure funding in intentional and equitable ways to make sure water and wastewater projects serve communities with the greatest need.

1.A.3 Improve management strategies for pathogens, toxins, and nutrients to have a more extensive focus on water quality standards than traditional total maximum daily load plans, which primarily manage industrial point sources and municipal stormwater.

1.A.4 Improve compliance with the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act of 1973 and the NPDES Construction Stormwater Permit Coverage, state post-construction stormwater requirements, and the NPDES Industrial Stormwater Program.

Objective B: Protect outdoor, ambient air quality to provide public health benefits for all.

Strategies

1.B.1 Conduct air quality monitoring for hazardous and criteria pollutants and develop strategies for monitoring emerging compounds and determining contributing sources.

1.B.2 Develop clear and consistent air quality permits that comply with state and federal regulations and take into consideration public input.

1.B.3 Ensure compliance with air quality rules and regulations through regular inspections, technical assistance, education, engagement, and outreach.

Objective C: Maintain and enhance land quality in North Carolina by ensuring the effective management of solid and hazardous waste material and proper supervision of dams.

Strategies

1.C.1 Expand the use of the Brownfields Program to stimulate safe redevelopment of contaminated sites and achieve higher levels of sustainability, thereby supporting both public health and economic development.

1.C.2 Effectively assess and remediate environmental contamination at solid waste, hazardous waste, and Superfund sites where needed while also increasing the use of risk-based remediation to provide protective land use controls on properties moving forward.

1.C.3 Analyze solid waste management disposal and materials management trends to plan for adequate disposal capacity and to encourage and incentivize waste reduction and recovery.

1.C.4 Inspect dams at the required frequency and take necessary and proactive actions to ensure protection of public safety.

Objective D: Protect North Carolina’s coastal resources and marine life through planning, permitting, research, engagement, and education.

Strategies

1.D.1 Develop management plans for coastal habitats and marine and estuarine fisheries using best available science, robust data collection, and stakeholder input.

1.D.2 Maintain watershed restoration plans to protect, restore, or replicate natural habitats and hydrology through natural and nature-based solutions.

1.D.3 Patrol coastal waters and enforce state rules and regulations for protecting natural resources, public health, and ensuring the quality of North Carolina’s fisheries.

1.D.4 Work through the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership to foster greater engagement with the Commonwealth of Virginia to improve and protect the water quality in the Sounds.

Objective E: Promote environmental stewardship, sustainable practices, and going beyond compliance through non-regulatory technical and compliance assistance, outreach, and recognition programs.

Strategies

1.E.1 Support, promote, and provide technical assistance for multi-media compliance, pollution prevention, natural resource conservation, and recycling.

1.E.2: Promote beyond compliance activities and sustainable practices through environmental recognition programs and industry networks.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Measure yearly improvements in air, water, and land trends through monitoring. Track implementation status of specific recommendations found in division plans with milestones of achieving implementing recommendations within pre-determined timeframes.

Goal 2: Create a working environment where employees are empowered to be active participants in developing science-based solutions to better protect public health and the environment.

The core element at DEQ contributing to the agency’s success is its people. We want to create a diverse workforce that’s empowered to be leaders and creative thinkers and takes pride in their work and the work of their colleagues.

Objective A: Foster creativity and collaboration within DEQ. Create a collegial atmosphere that encourages team members to be inventive and challenge the status quo. Encourage and provide opportunities for innovation and creative problem solving.

Strategies

2.A.1 Provide opportunities for staff among and across divisions to engage with each other in formal and informal settings to promote teamwork and collaboration.

2.A.2 Utilize technology to increase broader employee participation during events.

2.A.3 Routinely highlight employees or teams for innovative thinking in newsletters, social media, employee events, and other forms of recognition.

Objective B: Provide professional development and career advancement opportunities to retain our best talents. Develop pathways to create a multi-generational and diverse workforce.

Strategies

2.B.1 Develop training programs for employees interested in or currently serving in management.

2.B.2 Increase recruitment efforts and outreach to NC Colleges and Universities – including Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

2.B.3 Provide intentional opportunities for employees, including interns, to grow professionally, such as through a mentoring program.

Objective C: Motivate leaders to effectively engage with their staff and inspire them to be agents of positive change.

Strategies

2.C.1 Demonstrate an employee-focused leadership style that instills value, trust, and appreciation of DEQ employees.

2.C.2 Expand on the mentorship program to create positive onboarding, opportunities to lead, and foster collaboration and teamwork.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Document increase in employee events and track employee turnout for events. Measure rate of entry level position postings compared to non-entry level positions and track increase year over year. Track how new hires were recruited and where they received their education. Consider exit interviews and other employee surveys when measuring employee satisfaction. Track increase in overall engagement in Department-wide activities (like lunch and learns, friendly challenges etc.) and professional development opportunities.

Goal 3: Modernize and streamline internal processes to provide enhanced public service, increase transparency, and strengthen partnerships to better serve the people and businesses of North Carolina.

In the 21st century, we have access to a variety of tools and technologies that can allow us to reach wider audiences and provide greater access to our services. It is central to our mission as a public agency that we use every resource at our disposal to increase efficiency, equity, and transparency. As we take that journey, we will also inspire an employee culture focused on protecting the information and privacy of our constituents and employees.

Objective A: Streamline permit handling, compliance, and inspection processes.

Strategies

3.A.1 Assess existing permit processes from start to finish for inefficiencies and make improvements wherever possible.

3.A.2 Evaluate the feasibility of expanding express permitting options.

3.A.3 Study the existing permit fee structure to determine whether revenues generated are sufficient to support regulatory duties and make recommendations for changes as needed.

Objective B: Develop secure digital solutions for agency business, external communications, and regulatory actions.

Strategies

3.B.1 Continue working on the Permitting Transformation Program to completely digitize and streamline permitting processes within the Department.

3.B.2 Develop and maintain an internal structure to track and analyze permit data. With robust feedback loops on all permits, we can pinpoint issue areas and address them directly.

3.B.3 Modernize, develop, and maintain digital solutions for the delivery of non-regulatory tools and resources that improve communications and technical assistance to external customers and the public.

3.B.4 Incorporate cyber security in our tools, technologies, and processes, and promote cyber security training and awareness to all our employees.

Objective C: Enhance technical assistance and regional office support for permit applicants, businesses, and the public.

Strategies

3.C.1 Increase staffing and resources to non-regulatory programs, including those that work directly with the public or with external partners for coordination and communication.

3.C.2 Provide opportunities for staff from various divisions and regional offices to share experiences, ideas, and to learn from each other to provide better service to the public.

3.C.3 Implement creative and effective solutions to reduce backlogs across all permit types.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Assess current average turnaround time for specific permit processes and measure for shorter process-time (without losing quality) year over year. Track implementation progress of Permit Transformation Program with goal of completion.

Goal 4: Ensure the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

All North Carolinians should have access to clean air, land, and water and should be able to live a healthy and abundant life no matter where they live, what they look like, or how much money is in their pockets. DEQ must be intentional in prioritizing and achieving environmental justice and equity throughout its programs and decision-making.

Objective A: Ensure funding processes include equitable access for underserved communities.

Strategies

4.A.1 Provide training to grant program staff on environmental justice and equity concerns and develop processes to provide equitable access for underserved communities.

4.A.2 Review grant programs to ensure equity considerations are part of the application and review processes.

4.A.3 Collaborate with private and public stakeholders and partners to alert North Carolina residents and businesses, particularly underserved communities and historically underutilized businesses, of state and federal grant opportunities.

Objective B: Incorporate environmental justice and equity throughout Departmental decision making.

Strategies

4.B.1 Provide additional training to staff on environmental justice concerns and strategies to address and incorporate equity considerations in their programs.

4.B.2 Identify gaps where environmental justice is not currently considered in Department decision-making and determine process changes that could be made to close those gaps.

4.B.3 Routinely utilize federal environmental justice mapping tools and DEQ's Community Mapping System earlier in the site assessment process.

Objective C: Enhance transparency by informing stakeholders of DEQ regulatory programs and actions, providing access to community level information, and increasing opportunities for public engagement.

Strategies

4.C.1 Provide presentations and educational materials on the Community Mapping System and other publicly available visual resources.

4.C.2 Ensure opportunities for public participation are publicized in accordance with the agency's Public Participation Plan, including enhanced outreach and engagement when appropriate, and update plan annually per Executive Order 246.

4.C.3 Offer support in accordance with the Agency’s Language Access Plan when communities need language assistance to meaningfully participate in Department programs, services, and actions.

Objective D: Encourage stakeholder engagement on issues of concern to underserved and underrepresented communities.

Strategies

4.D.1 Provide training to external partners, including other state agencies, local governments, Economic Development Partnerships, and Chambers of Commerce to increase awareness of underserved communities and environmental justice concerns.

4.D.2 Develop a pre-application toolkit to assist businesses and business recruiters engage with communities at all stages of the project development process.

4.D.3 Continue to solicit the advice of the Secretary’s Environmental Justice and Equity Board on issues that impact underserved and underrepresented communities and ways to improve engagement and outreach.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Number of trainings conducted yearly. Percentage of grant applications (or funding awarded) that benefit underserved communities. Track new EJ considerations in Department decision-making. Improved business/community relations. Increase in effective communication with communities.

Goal 5: Address climate change impacts through engagement, accounting, mitigation efforts, and resiliency strategies that are equitable and just.

DEQ will support North Carolina’s commitment to address the impacts of climate change and transition to a clean energy economy as outlined in Executive Order 80, Executive Order 216, and Executive Order 246. DEQ will collaborate with NC citizens, power providers, businesses, local governments, state agencies, education partners and the stakeholder community to reduce carbon pollution and create more resilient ecosystems and communities.

Objective A: Incorporate resiliency planning into Agency programming and decision-making.

Strategies

5.A.1 Coordinate with interagency partners to implement state agency recommendations outlined in North Carolina’s Climate Risk Assessment and Resilience Plan.

5.A.2 Integrate future climate conditions and resiliency into public and natural infrastructure improvements, disaster recovery programs, and relevant long-term agency planning and operations.

5.A.4 Increase public awareness of the importance of land conservation, planning for resilience, and the value to people from ecosystem function and services.

Objective B: Mitigate the impact of climate change by promoting the reduction of lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions through clean energy resources.

Strategies

5.B.1 Support programs and activities in the transportation, buildings, electricity supply, and energy efficiency sectors that support achieving greenhouse gas (GHG) targets contained in the energy legislation and Governor’s Executive Orders.

5.B.2 Maintain the statewide GHG inventory system that reports GHG emissions by sector and projects future emissions based upon existing policies and trends.

5.B.3 Form partnerships with local governments, businesses, K-12 schools, and institutions for higher learning to create clean energy apprenticeship, training, and education programs.

Objective C: Encourage the transition toward a more circular economy through source reduction and preservation of environmental resources.

Strategies

5.C.1 Support the growth of efficient and effective public and private recycling collection, processing, and manufacturing capacity, including new programs for food waste, through grants, education, and technical assistance.

5.C.2 Encourage public and private investment in recycling infrastructure and food waste diversion programs to reduce emissions and foster economic growth

5.C.3 Determine the impact of degrading plastics and marine debris on aquatic life, wetlands, sediment, and the benthos.

5.C.4 Evaluate strategies to improve waste reduction within Department operations.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Release of GHG Inventory every two years to measure system wide GHG reduction. Track rate of increase in households whose energy burden is reduced. Track increase in number of communities assisted with resilience planning. Audit current Department-wide waste and measure decrease over time. Track increase in investment and engagement for circular economy activities. Complete NC Flood Resiliency Blueprint.

Goal 6: Protect North Carolinians from exposures to emerging contaminants using a transparent and science-based decision-making process.

North Carolina is at the forefront of the emerging compounds issue. We are one of the leading states tackling it and DEQ’s work has been used as an example for what to do in other states and nationally. This will be a major focus of this Department for years to come.

Objective A: Utilize new and developing scientific data and other findings to identify, assess, and address contamination from both point and non-point sources to reduce exposures and protect public health.

Strategies

6.A.1. Formulate and implement a multimedia program to increase our understanding of the science around emerging contaminants in terms of the sources of pollution and the extent of exposure and associated risk.

6.A.2. Address unanswered scientific questions, data gaps, and the need for additional expertise through external partnerships with state and federal agencies including NC DHHS, EPA, NC Policy Collaboratory, universities, research institutes, and others.

6.A.3. Utilize the expertise of the Secretaries’ Science Advisory Board and others within the scientific community to review data and provide input in standards development and policy development.

Objective B: Work with experts in the field to synthesize and develop the scientific basis to support regulatory actions within DEQ’s authority and additional policymaking as needed to protect public health and the environment.

Strategies

6.B.1 Utilize the existing authority of DEQ’s regulatory divisions to increase monitoring, sampling, and data reporting.

6.B.2. Collaborate with permitted facilities to monitor for, develop test methods for, and identify safer alternatives to emerging compounds, and use all available tools to prevent contamination, including non-regulatory methods.

6.B.3. Coordinate with other states to understand differences in regulatory and policy approaches and work to replicate their successes as appropriate.

6.B.4. Take regulatory actions through standards and rule development, policy implementation, and permitting actions that curb harmful emissions and/or discharges. Take enforcement action when activities fail to comply with requirements.

Objective C: Develop a robust communication strategy for education and engagement with impacted communities, state, local, and federal partners, and research institutions.

Strategies

6.C.1. Streamline risk communication protocols for engaging, communicating, and educating within state government, other regulatory agencies, and the regulated community consistently.

6.C.2. Create educational and outreach materials for the public related to the Emerging Contaminants in their communities through collaboration with NCDHHS and other partners.

6.C.3 Conduct education and outreach to affected communities, including addressing resident requests for data and information surrounding emerging contaminants in a way. Communicate in an easily understandable way and offer materials in multiple languages as needed.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Identify unanswered emerging compound questions and data gaps. Track over time what gaps have already been addressed. Report increases in sampling and data monitoring activities. Document increase in engagement and traffic with emerging contaminant educational and outreach materials. Milestones include developing and implementing regulatory standards and environmental policies where needed.

Goal 7: Strengthen North Carolina’s infrastructure through thoughtful, strategic, and equitable investments in communities.

There is a historic level of infrastructure funding available and DEQ has been charged with administering a significant portion of it. It’s imperative that we maximize the impact of this once-in-a-lifetime funding. The processes we develop now will greatly influence the long-term impacts and benefits for North Carolina.

Objective A: Utilize a holistic and unified approach to ensure programs are working together towards a common goal for infrastructure related funding and activities.

Strategies

7.A.1 Create a cross-division organizational unit within the department for all infrastructure related funding and activities.

7.A.2 Form robust partnerships and leverage other sources of funding when possible, including from local governments, universities, and other external entities, to maximize impact of projects.

7.A.3 Coordinate with external partners such as the NC Pandemic Recovery Office and the NC Office of Recovery and Resiliency for better interagency and intergovernmental communication and outcomes.

7.A.4 Track and highlight infrastructure investments that support section 10 of Executive Order 246.

Objective B: Develop a robust strategy to track and measure short-term and long-term progress.

Strategies

7.B.1 Establish both department-wide and division-specific goals.

7.B.2 Develop a performance measure tracking template to be used across divisions for consistency, accountability, and transparency.

Objective C: Develop comprehensive communication strategy for education and outreach with local partners, impacted communities, and interested parties.

Strategies

7.C.1 Conduct outreach to environmental service providers and communities, especially small, rural, and historically underserved communities to ensure they are aware of funding and infrastructure improvement opportunities.

7.C.2 Highlight the environmental, economic, and public health benefits of infrastructure investments.

7.C.3 Communicate meaningful stories of how these investments are helping communities and residents.

Performance Measures/Milestones: Measure time it takes for each stage of the funding process. Measure total percent of Historically Underutilized Businesses contracted for projects. Document compliance with federal and state spending laws along with EO 246 compliance. Document outreach efforts with interested stakeholders and measure website and social media engagement on funding opportunities.