

NC DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

STRATEGIC PLAN

2025-2029



A Message from the Secretary

D. Reid Wilson



Dear North Carolina Residents,

The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) protects public health by ensuring that our air, water, and lands are clean and safe. The good news is that this work also stimulates economic growth. A clean, healthy environment attracts businesses, creates jobs, and enhances quality of life for families across our state. Whether by funding drinking water and wastewater system improvements, helping industries navigate our permitting process, promoting cleanup and redevelopment of contaminated brownfields properties, providing an environment that all communities can thrive in, or advancing our transition to a clean energy economy, DEQ's work is essential to North Carolina's enviable quality of life and economic success.

In this 2025–2029 Strategic Plan, DEQ will continue to focus on helping communities recover and rebuild from Hurricane Helene. Because severe weather events are becoming more frequent and destructive, DEQ will also prioritize partnering with local governments and community leaders to strengthen resiliency in all 100 counties.

DEQ will continue to focus on reducing exposure to PFAS and other forever chemicals that threaten the health of millions of North Carolinians. We will safeguard public health by identifying contaminated areas, providing alternative water supplies where needed, and implementing measures that reduce or eliminate pollution at the source.

DEQ will make substantial progress in modernizing permitting and other processes to provide efficient, timely, and transparent service to businesses, local governments, and communities.

DEQ's mission is simple yet profound: to provide science-based environmental stewardship for the health and prosperity of all North Carolinians. Guided by our vision and core values, and driven by our seven strategic goals, we are dedicated to using the best available science, within existing laws and rules, to protect public health, support disaster recovery, strengthen resiliency, ensure fair and meaningful public participation, and boost economic growth.

Thank you for your partnership in this work. Together, we can ensure that North Carolina remains a place where people and businesses thrive, supported by clean air, clean water, and healthy lands.

Yours truly,

D. Reid Wilson

D. Reid Wilson
Secretary

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

Vision: We envision a North Carolina where people are free to pursue prosperous and healthy lives supported by clean air, clean water, and clean land.

Core Values:

- *Pursue solutions that promote both **environmental protection and economic development***
 - *Engage all stakeholders and the general public to **promote transparency and accountability***
 - *Lead **with personal, professional, and scientific integrity***
 - *Pursue **innovative and collaborative solutions** to solve complex problems*
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Goals:

- 1) **Environmental and Public Health Protection:** Protect public health by setting and implementing science-based standards and by providing technical, compliance, permitting and financial assistance to residents, communities, businesses, and local governments to meet or exceed requirements, prevent pollution, and improve public health.
 - 2) **Community Restoration and Resilience:** Engage with policy makers, state agencies, local governments, and community leaders to support and accelerate the long-term recovery of communities devastated by Hurricane Helene and other natural disasters, and lead state efforts to strengthen communities' resiliency to future disasters.
 - 3) **Forever Chemicals:** Protect North Carolina's people and natural resources from exposure to PFAS and other forever chemicals, using a transparent, collaborative, and science-based decision-making process.
 - 4) **Environmental Infrastructure:** Strengthen North Carolina's infrastructure through thoughtful and strategic investments.
 - 5) **Community Engagement and Public Participation:** Ensure the meaningful involvement and fair treatment of all people with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, health safeguards, and policies.
 - 6) **Modernize DEQ:** Modernize processes and foster innovation to enhance efficiency in services, increase transparency, and strengthen partnerships to better serve all stakeholders and the general public.
 - 7) **Work Environment:** Create a work environment where employees feel valued and are empowered to be active participants in developing science-based solutions to better protect public health and the environment.
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Goal 1 Environmental and Public Health Protection: Protect public health by setting and implementing science-based standards and by providing technical, compliance, permitting and financial assistance to residents, communities, businesses, and local governments to meet or exceed requirements, prevent pollution, and improve public health.

Objective 1.A – Ensure that water quality will be sustained and where possible, enhanced through the standards and regulations set forth in state and federal statute.

- **Strategy 1.A.1:** *Provide 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.*
- **Strategy 1.A.2:** *Invest state and federal water infrastructure funding in intentional and efficient ways to make sure drinking water and wastewater projects serve communities with the greatest need.*
- **Strategy 1.A.3:** *Improve water quality 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.*
- **Strategy 1.A.4:** *Improve compliance with the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act of 1973 and the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Construction Stormwater Permit Coverage, state post-construction stormwater requirements, and the NPDES Industrial Stormwater Program.*

Objective 1.B – Protect outdoor, ambient air quality to provide public health benefits for all.

- **Strategy 1.B.1:** *Conduct air quality monitoring for hazardous and criteria pollutants and develop strategies for monitoring forever chemicals and determining contributing sources.*
- **Strategy 1.B.2:** *Develop clear and consistent air quality permits that comply with state and federal regulations and take into consideration public input.*
- **Strategy 1.B.3:** *Ensure compliance with air quality rules and regulations through regular inspections, technical assistance, education, engagement, and outreach.*

Objective 1.C – Preserve and enhance land quality in North Carolina by ensuring the effective management of solid and hazardous waste material and proper supervision of dams.

- **Strategy 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 public health, economic development, and preservation of natural areas.*
- **Strategy 1.C.2:** *Effectively assess and remediate environmental contamination at solid waste, hazardous waste, and Superfund sites where needed while increasing the use of risk-based remediation to provide protective land use controls on properties.*

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

Objective 1.D – Protect North Carolina’s coastal resources and marine life through planning, permitting, research, engagement, and education.

- **Strategy 1.D.1:** *Develop management plans for coastal habitats and marine and estuarine fisheries, using best available science, robust data collection, and stakeholder input. Implement actions as resources allow.*
- **Strategy 1.D.2:** *Maintain watershed restoration plans to protect, restore, or replicate natural habitats and hydrology through nature-based solutions.*
- **Strategy 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.*

Objective 1.E – Promote environmental stewardship and sustainable practices among businesses and local governments through non-regulatory technical and compliance assistance, outreach, and recognition programs.

- **Strategy 1.E.1:** *Provide multi-media compliance and pollution prevention technical assistance, natural resource conservation, and recycling program support and promotion.*
 - **Strategy 1.E.2:** *Promote compliance activities and sustainable practices through environmental recognition program and industry networks.*
 - **Strategy 1.E.3:** *Deliver technical and compliance assistance through DEQ programs to drive measurable environmental improvements.*
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Goal 2 Community Restoration and Resilience: Engage with policy makers, state agencies, local governments, and community leaders to support and accelerate the long-term recovery of communities devastated by Hurricane Helene and other natural disasters, and lead state efforts to strengthen communities' resiliency to future disasters.

Objective 2.A – Coordinate with agencies across state and local government to identify opportunities and potential partnerships in the planning and implementation of resilience actions.

- **Strategy 2.A.1:** Provide guidance on integrating data and science into grant programs and community projects.
- **Strategy 2.A.2:** Facilitate interagency communication and partnerships that support public-facing resilience policies and programs in ways that use state resources efficiently.
- **Strategy 2.A.3:** Connect cabinet agencies to external partners who can advance progress toward building resilience to natural hazards and increasingly extreme weather.

Objective 2.B – Support communities' efforts to build resilience to natural hazards and increasingly extreme weather.

- **Strategy 2.B.1:** Leverage the knowledge and expertise of external partners to increase capacity for building resilience in communities.
- **Strategy 2.B.2:** Create and maintain resources that help communities make data-informed decisions that increase their resilience to the impacts of natural hazards and severe weather.
- **Strategy 2.B.3:** Support communities' efforts to integrate resilience into long-term recovery.

Objective 2.C – Support planning, evaluation, and implementation of community flood resilience strategies using the North Carolina Flood Resiliency Blueprint.

- **Strategy 2.C.1:** Identify flood resiliency action strategies in all six priority river basins and prioritize projects for implementation as fund sources allow.
- **Strategy 2.C.2:** Train local leaders and decision makers in using the Blueprint and provide support for local flood resilience planning.
- **Strategy 2.C.3:** Connect with external partners who can promote the utility and use of the Blueprint.
- **Strategy 2.C.4:** Build the case for funding to support creation of Action Strategies in the 11 remaining river basins.

Objective 2.D – Utilize Departmental resources and programs to address resiliency needs across the state.

- **Strategy 2.D.1:** Ensure coordination of the department’s existing resiliency efforts housed in different divisions to improve effectiveness and efficiency of delivery of services.
 - **Strategy 2.D.2:** Identify, plan, and implement programs that aim to reduce the impacts of natural hazards, such as flooding, landslides, dam breaches, and other actions.
 - **Strategy 2.D.3:** Efficiently administer grants and other funding opportunities directly to communities to assist in resiliency efforts.
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Goal 3 Forever Chemicals: Protect North Carolina's people and natural resources from exposure to PFAS and other forever chemicals, using a transparent, collaborative, and science-based decision-making process.

Objective 3.A – Protect communities by identifying and notifying those who may be at risk of exposure, and expand the base of scientific knowledge for North Carolina-specific PFAS compounds.

- **Strategy 3.A.1:** *When requested by a homeowner, use available resources to test for PFAS in private wells and provide alternate drinking water where feasible and funds are available.*
- **Strategy 3.A.2:** *Prioritize future actions to protect drinking water supplies based upon the number of people impacted, concentration of PFAS in the drinking water, and the impacts to communities.*
- **Strategy 3.A.3:** *Prioritize the reporting and reduction of PFAS emissions or discharges to air, surface water, or groundwater from priority locations including but not limited to industrial sites, municipal wastewater treatment plants, landfills, land applications, and sites with firefighting foam use.*
- **Strategy 3.A.4:** *With guidance from the DEQ and DHH Secretaries' Science Advisory Board, evaluate existing scientific literature on PFAS risks and health effects and work with partners at DHHS, in federal government and the scientific community to identify the additional data needed to protect public health.*

Objective 3.B - Protect drinking water by developing and implementing science-based regulatory requirements and encouraging nonregulatory actions to prevent future PFAS pollution.

- **Strategy 3.B.1:** *Implement monitoring and reporting requirements for PFAS discharges and provide technical assistance to reduce or eliminate PFAS entering the environment.*
- **Strategy 3.B.2:** *Encourage permittees to monitor and voluntarily disclose PFAS information in their products, processes, stacks, and other release points and take early action to reduce or eliminate PFAS entering the environment and provide technical assistance to entities that take early action.*

Objective 3.C – Clean up existing contamination by focusing on remediation to address known sites of PFAS contamination, prioritizing those that impact communities.

- **Strategy 3.C.1:** *Set remediation goals for sites with PFAS contamination and ensure cleanup results in health protective outcomes.*

- **Strategy 3.C.2:** *Where a responsible party (RP) is known and a resident's private well is impacted, require the RP to provide alternate drinking water to the resident.*

Objective 3.D – Develop a robust communication strategy for education and engagement with impacted communities, state, local, and federal partners, and research institutions.

- **Strategy 3.D.1:** *Streamline risk communication protocols for engaging, communicating, and educating within state government, other regulatory agencies, and the regulated community consistently.*
 - **Strategy 3.D.2:** *Create educational and outreach materials for the public related to forever chemicals in their communities through collaboration with NCDHHS and other partners.*
 - **Strategy 3.D.3:** *Conduct education and outreach to affected communities, including addressing resident requests for data and information surrounding forever chemicals. Communicate in an easily understandable way and offer materials in multiple languages as needed.*
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Goal 4 Environmental Infrastructure: Strengthen North Carolina's infrastructure through thoughtful and strategic investments.

Objective 4.A - Utilize a unified approach to ensure programs are working towards a common goal for infrastructure funding and activities.

- **Strategy 4.A.1:** *Form robust partnerships with local governments, universities, and other external entities to maximize the impact of projects.*
- **Strategy 4.A.2:** *Coordinate with external partners for better interagency and intergovernmental communication and outcomes.*

Objective 4.B – Administer funding and programs to support statewide funding needs for reliable, resilient, and viable environmental infrastructure.

- **Strategy 4.B.1:** *Identify, plan, and implement projects that directly strengthen environmental infrastructure.*
- **Strategy 4.B.2:** *Establish department-wide and division-specific performance measures to track funding and programs in meeting statewide needs.*

Objective 4.C – Engage with utilities and partners to support the planning for viable infrastructure.

- **Strategy 4.C.1:** *Develop long term viability plans that emphasize planning for local government units designated as “Distressed”.*
- **Strategy 4.C.2:** *Conduct outreach to environmental service providers and communities, to ensure they are aware of funding and infrastructure improvement opportunities.*
- **Strategy 4.C.3:** *Highlight the environmental, economic, and public health benefits of infrastructure investments.*

Objective 4.D - Make efficient use of federal and state funding resources and collaboration across agencies in support of Hurricane Helene recovery.

- **Strategy 4.D.1:** *Develop and communicate funding programs and plans to address Hurricane Helene recovery. Provide technical assistance to potential grantees.*
 - **Strategy 4.D.2:** *Develop and communicate funding programs and plans to address recovery ahead of other disasters that may impact North Carolina.*
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Goal 5 Community Engagement and Public Participation: Ensure the meaningful involvement and fair treatment of all people with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, health safeguards, and policies.

Objective 5.A – Ensure funding processes are transparent and understandable to all communities and stakeholders.

- **Strategy 5.A.1:** *Provide training to grant program staff on community engagement and develop processes to provide increased access for all communities.*
- **Strategy 5.A.2:** *Review grant programs to ensure all outreach considerations are part of the application and review processes.*
- **Strategy 5.A.3:** *Collaborate with private and public stakeholders, as well as partners, to alert North Carolina residents and businesses of state and federal grant opportunities.*

Objective 5.B – Enhance transparency by informing stakeholders of DEQ regulatory programs and actions, providing access to community-level information, and increasing opportunities for public engagement.

- **Strategy 5.B.1:** *Provide presentations and educational materials on the Community Mapping System and other publicly available resources.*
- **Strategy 5.B.2:** *Ensure opportunities for public participation are publicized in accordance with the agency's Public Participation Plan.*
- **Strategy 5.B.3:** *Offer support in accordance with the agency's Language Access Plan.*

Objective 5.C – Encourage stakeholder engagement on issues of concern to economically disadvantaged communities.

- **Strategy 5.C.1:** *Provide training to external partners, including other state agencies, local governments, Economic Development Partnerships, and Chambers of Commerce to increase awareness of community engagement concerns.*
 - **Strategy 5.C.2:** *Develop a pre-application toolkit to assist businesses and business recruiters in engaging with communities at all stages of the project development process.*
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Goal 6 Modernize DEQ: Modernize processes and foster innovation to enhance efficiency in services, increase transparency, and strengthen partnerships to better serve all stakeholders and the general public.

Objective 6.A – Modernize permit, compliance, and inspection processes.

- **Strategy 6.A.1:** *Examine existing permit processes for inefficiencies and make improvements when possible.*
- **Strategy 6.A.2:** *Continue to implement the Permitting Transformation Program, meeting timelines and goals.*
- **Strategy 6.A.3:** *Develop and maintain an internal structure to track and analyze permit data.*
- **Strategy 6.A.4:** *Continue to evaluate the permit fee structure to identify opportunities for increases to support regulatory duties and make recommendations for changes as needed.*
- **Strategy 6.A.5:** *Identify strategies to reduce backlogs across all permit types and to increase efficiency.*

Objective 6.B – Develop secure digital solutions for agency business, external communications, and regulatory actions.

- **Strategy 6.B.1:** *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.*
- **Strategy 6.B.2:** *Incorporate cyber security in our tools, technologies, and processes, and promote cyber security training and awareness to all our employees.*
- **Strategy 6.B.3:** *Explore opportunities to use artificial intelligence to enhance agency business where feasible.*

Objective 6.C – Enhance technical assistance and regional office support for permit applicants, businesses, and the public.

- **Strategy 6.C.1:** *Assess staffing and resource needs, including those that work directly with the public or with external partners for coordination and communication.*
 - **Strategy 6.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.*
 - **Strategy 6.C.3:** *Offer training workshops, programs, and other opportunities to foster capacity building and support for permit applicants, businesses, and the public.*
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Goal 7 Work Environment: Create a work environment where employees feel valued and are empowered to be active participants in developing science-based solutions to better protect public health and the environment.

Objective 7.A – Foster creativity and collaboration within DEQ. Encourage and provide opportunities for innovation and creative problem solving.

- **Strategy 7.A.1:** Utilize technology to increase broader employee participation during events.
- **Strategy 7.A.2:** Routinely highlight employees or teams for innovative thinking and accomplishments, in newsletters, social media, employee events, and other forms of recognition
- **Strategy 7.A.3:** Create an internal research workgroup to engage with academia and other external partners to conduct joint projects and identify opportunities to develop science-based policy and programmatic recommendations.

Objective 7.B – Provide professional development and career advancement opportunities to retain the most qualified employees. Develop pathways to create a multi-generational and multifaceted workforce.

- **Strategy 7.B.1:** Develop training programs for employees interested in or currently serving in management.
- **Strategy 7.B.2:** Increase recruitment efforts and outreach to NC colleges and universities.
- **Strategy 7.B.3:** Provide intentional opportunities for employees, including interns, to grow professionally, such as through a mentoring program.
- **Strategy 7.B.4:** Evaluate salary administration plan to determine a compensation system more competitive with the job market.

Objective 7.C – Cultivate a work atmosphere where leaders contribute to the growth and advancement of staff and inspire them to be good stewards of North Carolina and the environment.

- **Strategy 7.C.1:** Demonstrate an employee-focused leadership style that instills value, trust, and appreciation of DEQ employees.
 - **Strategy 7.C.2:** Expand on the mentorship program to create positive onboarding, opportunities to lead, and to foster collaboration and teamwork.
 - **Strategy 7.C.3:** Provide opportunities for staff among and across divisions to engage with each other to promote teamwork and collaboration.
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Priority Questions:

- 1) How can the agency effectively integrate resiliency planning into long-term decision-making processes and infrastructure improvements while minimizing the impact of disasters on the environment, built infrastructure, and public health?
 - 2) What are the exposure levels of forever chemicals in drinking water wells and surface water bodies that supply drinking water, groundwater, and soil? Which areas are exceeding health-based levels? What are the effective treatment strategies that DEQ can support and implement under its authority?
 - 3) What changes in current hiring and employee relations processes are needed to recruit, retain, and develop an effective workforce?
 - 4) What DEQ permitting, customer service, funding allocation, and program service processes benefit from streamlining, modernization, and innovation?
 - 5) How can DEQ leverage infrastructure investment to promote regional solutions?
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