

Air quality monitors targeted

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Monitors not required
by EPA would be cut

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State lawmakers who have been cutting environmental regulations in their quest for to streamline government have a new target: cutting the number of air quality monitors around the state.

That provision is in a wide-ranging regulatory overhaul bill that has cleared the Senate and is headed to the House. SB734 would make state environmental regulators get rid of any ambient air monitors that federal law doesn't require – a big concern to the neighbors of some high-profile locations that could lose their monitors, such as:

- The one set up on Blackstone Drive in Sanford to help monitor pollution from potential fracking operations in Lee County.

- The device at the sulfur smelting plant at Bayview Ferry on the Pamlico River in Bath, where neighbors have long complained of the odor.

- The monitor across the street from a proposed massive coal-fired cement plant in Castle Hayne in New Hanover County that community activists and environmentalists have been fighting for six years. The plant is not far from two new schools and next to the Northeast Cape Fear River.

"When I heard about that I just couldn't believe it," Kayne Darrell of Castle Hayne, one of those neighbors and activists, said about the bill Wednesday.

Aside from eliminating monitors that people in some communities might like, the idea of shutting down dozens of air quality equipment stations if the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says it's OK – and do it in the next three months – isn't that simple.

The EPA has to approve states' networks of air quality monitors, which are submitted in detailed plans every year by July 1. The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources reviews its monitors – adding some, eliminating others – based on such criteria as population, weather patterns and air quality standards, which often change.

"We're doing it based on the science: where we think we have air quality problems in the state, and where we need information to control air pollution and predict where we might have problems," DENR spokesman Tom Mather said.

Monitoring stations

Currently, the state operates 132 monitors in 56 shed-like stations. Mecklenburg, Buncombe and Forsyth operate their own monitors. More than half of the state monitors are not specifically required by the EPA. But that doesn't mean they can just be closed, according to DENR.

The monitors that are required by the federal agency meet certain criteria, while those not required individually might still be considered necessary to form an adequate network, Mather says. Besides population and pollution levels, monitors also are used in forecasting and modeling.

All of which has to be signed off on by the EPA, in an annual process that isn't squeezed into the three-month span under the proposed legislation.

Additionally, the EPA will soon
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release proposed new standards for ground-level ozone, or smog, which are expected to be more stringent. That could have implications across the state if areas are suddenly considered out of compliance with federal regulations. Sometimes businesses are reluctant to locate in an area that is out of compliance, because of increased regulation and more paperwork, Mather said.

"Some of these monitors, where they are meeting standards, people might think are superfluous, all the sudden become very important," Mather said.

In other words, if the EPA is getting tougher, it might not be the right move for North Carolina to do less air quality monitoring.

"That's why we're baffled by this legislation," Mather said.

Cost savings minimal

It isn't clear where the legislation originated. In March, a staffer in the legislature's fiscal research division emailed DENR asking for a detailed report on the

monitors, which the agency compiled. The staffer declined to say what prompted the inquiry, as bill-drafting communications are confidential.

Sen. Trudy Wade, a Republican from Greensboro who is a co-sponsor of the bill, has said in public legislative discussions that it was prompted by the looming EPA regulations, which could require more monitoring of specific sources of pollution, such as large industrial plants, instead of the more common ambient monitoring of general air quality in a region.

Wade said that could prompt a realignment of monitors, and so the state had to be in a position to use its resources to best advantage.

The cost savings would be minimal. The DENR report indicates the annual operating costs of the three types of monitoring – gaseous, fine particle and air toxics – range from an estimated \$11,400 to \$36,000 for each device. Most of the funding comes from the EPA, although some comes from state vehicle inspection fees and gas taxes.

Mather said the monitoring network can save the state money and help businesses. Charlotte has been the only part of the state not meeting ozone standards, a designation that has included surrounding counties. But monitors placed in outlying counties showed some areas were meeting standards, and so portions didn't have to be included in that designation, Mather said. Again, that would make an area more attractive to some businesses.

One such device, the Rockwell monitoring station in Rowan County, downwind from Charlotte, helps the state understand what's happening in Mecklenburg County and develop strategies, the DENR report notes. Only one of the eight monitors there is currently required by the EPA.

'Public health threat'

Environmentalists are concerned that cutting back on monitors is a step toward dirtier air.

"How are we better off knowing less about our air quality?" said Molly Diggins, state director for the Sierra Club. "And how can

we keep our air quality from deteriorating if we remove a primary source of data in our communities?"

Darrell, the community activist in Castle Hayne, said much of the motivation spurring neighbors of the proposed cement plant came from information gleaned from the air quality monitor there, which documented that New Hanover County was in danger of exceeding sulfur dioxide standards.

"We wouldn't have known about that without that monitor," she said.

The Southern Environmental Law Center, which has represented environmental groups in litigation over the cement plant, says Titan America's air quality permit application proposed to emit more than 5,000 tons of sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, carbon monoxide, particulate matter and organic compounds every year, burned in a coal-fired kiln.

Doug Springer, a Castle Hayne resident who runs boat tours on the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers, says the prospect of a cement plant of that magnitude argues for closer monitoring in an area already

burdened with pollution.

"On a daily basis I have to apologize to my customers on the river for the different smells and odors coming out of the landfill, chemical plants on the Northeast. It's a reality," Springer said. "We smell it in downtown Wilmington on certain days if the wind is blowing right. I have a hard time understanding the justification for doing less monitoring now. We probably should be doing more."

The monitor in Lee County is collecting baseline data that will be used to monitor any changes in air quality caused by hydraulic fracturing of shale gas in that area, once that process is legalized.

Therese Vick of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League says the state needs all its monitors.

"Closing air monitoring that bears silent witness, measures things that the EPA doesn't require to be measured, gives a more complete picture of what's going on in the ambient air," Vick said. "I think it's a public health threat."

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