Water programs to merge; activists worried

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By Annalise Frank
afrank@newsobserver.com

RALEIGH The state Department of Environment and Natural Resources announced Thursday that it will consolidate two divisions that deal with water, a move that environmentalists fear will hurt the state's water quality program.

DENR is merging its divisions of Water Quality and Water Resources into one agency, the Division of Water Resources. The move is part of Gov. Pat McCrory's mission to make state government more responsive, said DENR spokesman Jamie Kritzer. It puts similar programs under the same roof, and allows DENR to trim jobs that overlap.

Environmental groups say the consolidation will mean cutting essential protections for the state's waters.

"It's diagnostic of the continued undermining of water quality and water resource regulation under the current governor and legislature," said Hope Taylor, the executive director of Clean Water for N.C., an environmental advocacy group.

DENR's water quality program regulates water pollution and implements rules required under the federal Clean Water Act. The water resources program, on the other hand, deals with water quantity, developing drinking water supplies and dealing with drought, among other things.

As of Aug. 1, the state water quality program will operate under the Division of Water Resources.

That won't instantly change how they operate, but it does kick off an evaluation of all of DENR's water quality and water resource responsibilities.

Senior staffers will assess the program, aiming to rid DENR of outdated and inefficient practices, Kritzer said. The merger, to be completed in 2014, will include an estimate of the fiscal impact and will most likely result in staff cuts.

DENR also will detach the team that regulates stormwater pollution from the water quality program. The team will move to the Division of Energy, Mineral and Land Resources.

Effectively, that places stormwater regulators with people who use a similar permitting process, instead of with people who regulate water.

Putting the stormwater regulators and other people who hand out similar permits together "will enable us to speed up permitting, which will result in cost savings to the regulated community," Kritzer said.

Derb Carter, the director of the Southern Environmental Law Center's North Carolina office, said the stormwater and water quality employees both enforce water pollution regulation, so they should be housed under the same roof.

But it might be too early to tell if moving stormwater regulation to a new department will adversely affect it, said Bill Hunt, an associate professor of biological and agricultural engineering at N.C. State University.

"The fact that they are being moved en masse ... is good," Hunt said. "They're not splintering" the program.

Frank: 919-829-4870