

Re-evaluate — Don't Eliminate



North Carolina Deputy Environment Secretary Tom Reeder told the Environmental Review Commission on Feb. 10 that they should consider relaxing some of the state's water pollution rules because it's unclear if they're working, according to a report on WRAL.com.

Reeder said that the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is examining regulations on buffers around smaller streams, along with laws requiring the reduction of nutrient runoff into Falls and Jordan lakes

in particular.

According to a follow-up report on this story from Coastal Review Online, the DEQ later said it will not in fact push for legislation this session to change the longstanding rules; however, "they could pursue future changes on storm water, nutrient loading and buffer regulations."

Reeder said local governments and private citizens have spent millions to reduce pollution from point sources and non-point sources alike, with no clear evidence that their efforts are having the intended effect.

His statements were supported by data he presented from the Neuse and Tar-Pamlico basins, showing little change in phosphorus and nitrogen levels after the runoff and buffer rules were implemented years ago. He also referenced a General Accounting Office report showing that 80% of impaired water systems in the U.S. share in the struggle to meet their required reductions in nutrient runoff.

Reeder therefore concluded to lawmakers that he doesn't know if it is even possible, technologically speaking, to resolve these problems, citing there are "not a lot of successful examples out there" to follow.

Reeder also suggested banishing the 50-ft buffer requirement for intermittent streams.

Buffers around small streams were designed to improve water quality by filtering pollutants from storm water runoff. They also are said to have a slew of other benefits, including reducing flooding and erosion by stabilizing stream banks and moderating stream temperature and sunlight, keeping aquatic life healthy.

Reeder's comments, unsurprisingly, were met with strong criticism from environmental advocates.

Matthew Starr, Upper Neuse riverkeeper, for example, called Reeder's conclusions about the Neuse and Tar-Pamlico basins "grossly inaccurate," pointing out that Reeder failed to include nutrient loading from the hog and poultry industries. "What would that look like if the storm water controls weren't there?" the WRAL.com report quoted him asking.

Starr also pointed out that runoff regulation ultimately is in place to protect drinking water.

Because Reeder implied doing away with the regulatory limits, rather than correcting them, Starr said, it could lead to a major decrease in water quality.

According to the Coastal Review Online report, Molly Diggins, executive director of the North Carolina chapter of the Sierra Club, said she was shocked Reeder was so dismissive of the state water quality regulations' effectiveness—given his long history with them.

I am with Reeder on taking a step back and evaluating whether or not certain rules are actually making a difference; however, until a viable correction can be outlined, the state cannot afford to risk jeopardizing water quality in the interim if the current rules are simply relaxed or obliterated.

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