

# SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

Telephone 919-967-1450

601 WEST ROSEMARY STREET, SUITE 220  
CHAPEL HILL, NC 27516-2356

Facsimile 919-929-9421

September 8, 2015

## *Via Electronic Submission*

DENR Rule Comments  
1601 Mail Service Center  
Raleigh, NC 27699-1601

Re: Initial Determinations Regarding the Necessity of Rules in 15A NCAC 04

Dear Sir or Madam:

The Southern Environmental Law Center submits these comments on behalf of Sound Rivers in response to the initial determination by the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (“DENR”) that certain rules implemented by the Sedimentation Control Commission (“SCC”) are “unnecessary.” We write primarily to emphasize the importance of rules codified at 15A NCAC 04 .0116 and .0126. We disagree with the agency’s conclusion that these rules are “obsolete, redundant, or otherwise not needed.”<sup>1</sup>

Our comments are generally motivated by recognition of the threat to water quality in North Carolina posed by unchecked erosion and sedimentation. That threat was explicitly recognized by our legislature when it observed in the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act of 1973 (“SPCA”) that “[t]he sedimentation of streams, lakes and other waters of this State constitutes a major pollution problem.”<sup>2</sup> Notably, however, the General Assembly did not presume to possess the expertise necessary to prevent this “major pollution problem.” Instead, it created the SCC and commanded the Commission “in cooperation with the Secretary of Transportation and other appropriate State and federal agencies, [to] develop, promulgate, publicize, and administer a comprehensive State erosion and sedimentation control program.”<sup>3</sup> The resulting program is largely implemented through rules in 15A NCAC 04, and we wish to see those rules retained as currently codified.

Because the sedimentation and erosion control program is of vital importance to the health of our State’s waters, we are concerned that rules deemed “unnecessary” will expire unless “adopted to conform to or implement federal law.”<sup>4</sup> The rules addressed herein were adopted to implement state law, specifically the SPCA. DENR’s initial determination that these

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<sup>1</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A(a)(6) (defining “unnecessary”).

<sup>2</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. 113A-51.

<sup>3</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 113A-54.

<sup>4</sup> See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A.

rules are unnecessary therefore places these important regulations under threat of automatic expiration.

We emphasize that the public has not objected to the rules DENR labeled “unnecessary.” Indeed, had DENR received any “public comment” (defined in N.C. Gen. Stat § 150B-21.3A(a)(5) to mean a written objection) regarding these rule within the past two years, the agency *cannot* label them “unnecessary.”<sup>5</sup> The absence of objection is unsurprising because elimination of these rules would deprive both the public and DENR of useful regulatory guidance designed to control sedimentation pollution in North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> We therefore encourage DENR to reconsider its decision to label these rules as “unnecessary,” and, in recognition of their value as currently codified, classify them as “necessary without substantive public interest.”<sup>7</sup>

**I. The Rule enabling enforcement of sedimentation control for existing uncovered areas (15A NCAC 04B .0116) is necessary, and should be retained as written**

First, DENR proposes to classify as “unnecessary” the rule designed to prevent sedimentation pollution from “Existing Uncovered Areas.”<sup>8</sup> In a 2013 Memorandum, DENR explained its reasoning as follows: “[t]his rule was written to cover areas that predated the sedimentation pollution control act. Since the act was 1973 this part of the administrative code is unnecessary.”<sup>9</sup>

DENR is partly correct; one purpose of the Existing Uncovered Areas Rule is to prevent erosion and sedimentation caused by land-disturbing activity that predated the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act of 1973.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, the rule enhances the effectiveness of DENR’s efforts to prevent sedimentation pollution by enabling retroactive application of the Act and associated regulations. However, we disagree with the agency’s separate conclusion that the rule is unnecessary and should be allowed to expire. In fact, according to the North Carolina Court of Appeals, “eliminating from regulation all erosion in progress prior to the effective date of the act and continuing thereafter . . . cannot survive the declared policy of the legislation.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In either circumstance, the agency would be required to label the rules “necessary with public interest,” *See* N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A(a)(3).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the agency has previously opined that rules “adopted as Title 15A, Chapter 4 of the North Carolina Administrative Code” are “pertinent to sedimentation and erosion control.” *See* SCC et al, *Erosion and Sediment Control Planning and Design Manual* 1.3 (June 6, 2006), available at [http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=8b74a0ce-e050-4b7b-bab6-24efa8e50fdf&groupId=38334](http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=8b74a0ce-e050-4b7b-bab6-24efa8e50fdf&groupId=38334).

<sup>7</sup> *See* N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A(a)(4) (defining “necessary without substantive public interest”).

<sup>8</sup> 15A N.C. Admin. Code 04 .0116.

<sup>9</sup> [http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=03b6f73a-b578-4c3b-a9a3-92317bafce51&groupId=38334](http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=03b6f73a-b578-4c3b-a9a3-92317bafce51&groupId=38334)

<sup>10</sup> 15A N.C. Admin. Code 04 .0126(a). Notably, however, the rule also requires entities seeking delegation of authority to administer their own sedimentation and erosion control programs to provide for the treatment of “existing exposed areas.” *Id.* .0126(c). The rule is not clear whether that is a reference to exposed areas existing when delegation is sought or exposed areas existing when the SPCA became effective.

<sup>11</sup> *State ex rel. Lee v. Penland-Bailey Co., Inc.*, 50 N.C. App. 498, 503 (NC. Ct. App. 1981).

The legislature enacted the SPCA to provide for, *inter alia*, a sedimentation control program that included the “adoption of minimal mandatory standards which will permit development of this State to continue with the least detrimental effects from pollution by sedimentation.”<sup>12</sup> In *Hensley v. NC DENR Div. of Land Resources* (“*Hensley*”), the Supreme Court of North Carolina stated that “[t]he purpose of the [Act] is to *minimize sedimentation resulting from* land-disturbing activity and not simply to regulate the land-disturbing activity itself.”<sup>13</sup> To minimize sedimentation, the Act requires “short-term and long-term measures to control accelerated erosion and prevent off-site sedimentation.”<sup>14</sup> The legislature would not require long-term erosion measures to mitigate anticipated harm if such harm was not expected to persist over time. In other words, the Existing Uncovered Areas Rule is not “obsolete.”

Yet, inexplicably, DENR contends that the Existing Uncovered Areas Rule is unnecessary solely due to the passage of time. This argument presumes that erosion and sedimentation is unlikely to have gone undetected since the passage of the Act. Notably, however, the SCC has repeatedly lamented its inability to effectively police land-disturbing activity due to inadequate resources to hire a full complement of inspectors.<sup>15</sup> If the agency cannot effectively perform its duties, it should not advance arguments that presume such performance.

Moreover, the rule provides a useful safeguard against undetected harm. By labeling the Existing Uncovered Areas Rule “unnecessary,” DENR essentially proposes to eliminate the only regulatory mechanism for preventing impacts of long-term accelerated erosion. In fact, without the Existing Uncovered Areas Rule, neither affected citizens nor DENR would have appropriate recourse against a violating party. As such, the rule is neither “redundant” nor “otherwise not needed.”

As noted above, the North Carolina Court of Appeals has previously warned against the consequences of failing to apply the Existing Uncovered Areas rule; notably, elimination of the rule under the auspices of rules review would achieve the same result the Court held to be inconsistent with the SPCA.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the Court later stated, in *Cox v. State ex rel. Summers* (“*Cox*”),<sup>17</sup> that the rule is not simply an addition to the SPCA, but rather is necessary “[t]o accomplish the purpose of the Act.”<sup>18</sup> Because the rule enables “the Act and the regulations enacted pursuant to ... appl[y] to land-disturbing activities which occurred before the Act and

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<sup>12</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 113-51.

<sup>13</sup> *Hensley v. NC DENR Div. of Land Resources*, 364 N.C. 285, 290 (2010) (emphasis added).

<sup>14</sup> H. Joseph Kleiss, Soil Facts: North Carolina Erosion and Sedimentation Pollution Control Program, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (May 1995), available at <http://content.ces.ncsu.edu/19135.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Kari Barsness, DENR Director of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, to NC Environmental Review Commission (Sept. 30, 2011) (noting that the infrequency of inspections was “a chronic problem that limits the effectiveness of the sedimentation program”) DENR, *Report to the Environmental Review Commission on the Implementation of the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Division of Land Resources, Land Quality Section* (Oct. 1, 2010) (“[A]dequate funding of the program sufficient to serve the public and protect natural resources is desperately needed.”).

<sup>16</sup> *State ex rel. Lee v. Penland-Bailey Co., Inc.*, 50 N.C. App. 498, 504 (NC. Ct. App. 1981).

<sup>17</sup> *Cox v. State ex rel. Summers*, 81 N.C. App. 612, 615 (NC. Ct. App. 1986).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

regulations became effective,”<sup>19</sup> it is not “unnecessary.” Accordingly, we urge DENR to revise its initial determination to the contrary.

## **II. The Rule Limiting Sedimentation from Railroad Construction and Operation (15A NCAC 04 .0128) is not “Unnecessary”**

Next, DENR proposes to classify as “unnecessary” the rule designed to prevent sedimentation pollution from railroad construction and operation. In a 2013 Memorandum, DENR stipulates that “[t]his rule has been superseded by federal law and is unnecessary.”<sup>20</sup> The agency’s reasoning is unclear, possibly incorrect, and understates the value of the rule.

To begin, 15A NCAC 04 .0126 (the “Railroad Rule”) was first written in 1995 in explicit recognition of the fact that under federal law, “existing railroad roadbeds comprise a zone of federal preeminence within which federal law takes precedence over” the SPCA.<sup>21</sup> However, as stated when DENR proposed the Railroad Rule, “[o]utside this zone, the Office of the Attorney General has advised that the Commission does have authority to enforce the Sedimentation Pollution Control Act of 1973.”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, DENR sought to assert control over erosion and sedimentation caused by railroad construction and operation to the maximum extent possible. Indeed, when DENR first adopted the Railroad Rule, the agency observed that the rule was “needed to clarify the authority ... to regulate land-disturbing activities undertaken by railroad companies.”<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the Railroad Rule clarifies that although the “[SPCA] and rules do not apply to activities conducted within the zone of federal preeminence” the “[SPCA] and rules apply to all other activities conducted by railroad companies.”<sup>24</sup>

DENR does not, in the memorandum claiming that the Railroad Rule is nevertheless “unnecessary,” identify the federal law it believes “superseded” the Railroad Rule. Nor are we aware of any federal law addressing the full scope of requirements stated in the Railroad Rule. For instance, unlike the Railroad Rule, federal law does not attempt to control sedimentation outside of the zone of federal preeminence. Also, under the rule, the SCC is directed to “provide advice and technical assistance to railroad companies in the development and implementation of voluntary best management practices to reduce environmental impacts that may otherwise result from activities conducted within the zone of federal preeminence.”<sup>25</sup> Stated differently, even where the SCC cannot, due to federal preemption, force railroad companies to protect North

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> Memorandum from Gray Hauser, State Sedimentation Specialist NCDENR, on Rules Review Specifications to Toby Vinson, Chief Eng’r NCDENR (Dec. 16, 2013), *available at* [http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=03b6f73a-b578-4c3b-a9a3-92317bafce51&groupId=38334](http://portal.ncdenr.org/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=03b6f73a-b578-4c3b-a9a3-92317bafce51&groupId=38334)

<sup>21</sup> 15A N.C. Admin. Code 04B .0126 (“The Commission recognizes that under the Federal Railroad Safety Act of 1970 (FRSA), 45 U.S.C. 421 et seq., as interpreted by federal administrative rules and court decisions, existing railroad roadbeds comprise a zone of federal preeminence within which federal law takes precedence over the Act [the SPCA].”). The referenced federal law was recodified without substantive change in Title 49 as part of a recodification of rail safety laws in 1994.” *BNSF Ry. Co. v. Box*, 470 F.Supp.2d 855, 871 (2007).

<sup>22</sup> 9 N.C. Reg. 1648 (Jan. 17, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> 15A N.C. Admin. Code 04B .0126(d).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* 04B. 0126(f).

Carolina waters from erosion and sedimentation, the SCC is directed in the Railroad Rule to identify and encourage opportunities for such protection. There is neither any federal law, nor any other North Carolina law, commanding this action by the SCC. Indeed, the SPCA makes no reference whatsoever to railroad activity. Instead, it commands the SCC to prevent sedimentation from land-disturbing activity; where that activity is conducted by railroad companies and occurs within the jurisdiction of the SCC<sup>26</sup> the Railroad Rule is a necessary tool to implement the SPCA.

For centuries, railroad companies have engaged in land-disturbing activity; there is no evidence that these companies have ceased such activity. Because that activity continues to pose a threat to water quality in North Carolina if insufficiently regulated, the Railroad Rule is not “obsolete.” Moreover, because the substance of the Railroad Rule is not repeated elsewhere in state or federal law, the rule cannot be properly considered “redundant.” Finally, because the Railroad Rule commands certain SCC action critical to protection of our waters from the actions of railroad companies, it is not “otherwise not needed.” For these reasons, we urge DENR to reconsider its decision to label the Railroad Rule “unnecessary;” we believe it serves important purposes as codified, and therefore encourage the agency to label it “necessary without substantive public interest.”

### **III. Overuse of the “Necessary With Substantive Interest” Label**

Notably, DENR determined twenty-five of the forty-five rules administered by the SCC to be “necessary with substantive public interest.” Fortunately, that means that a majority of the rules administered by the SCC are currently safe from automatic expiration. However, it also means that many of the SCC rules will not “be allowed to remain in effect without further action.” We hope rules labeled “necessary with substantive public interest” will ultimately be retained in some form. After all, rules bearing that label must be “readopted as though the rules were new rules.”<sup>27</sup> Yet, we note with concern that DENR has, during the process of rules review, proposed to delete entire rules even after labeling them “necessary with substantive public interest.”

To be clear, we do not intend to quibble with the agency’s documentation of public objection. As discussed above, a rule must be labeled “necessary with substantive interest” if DENR received “written comments objecting to the rule.” However, it is unclear whether the labeling determinations for these SCC rules were dictated by public objection or instead made at DENR’s discretion. After all, a rule may also be labeled “necessary with substantive public interest” if “the rule affects the property interest of the regulated public and the agency knows or suspects that any person may object to the rule.” However, for rules that do have a regulatory effect on the public’s property interest, if DENR has not received, but instead merely anticipates, public objection, we encourage the agency to reconsider its determinations. DENR should not needlessly subject itself to the administratively burdensome rulemaking process.<sup>28</sup> Nor should

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<sup>26</sup> See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 113A-56.

<sup>27</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A(c)(2)g.

<sup>28</sup> See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.2 (establishing the multi-step process of adopting a permanent rule).

the agency unreasonably overburden its rulemaking coordinators.<sup>29</sup> DENR may retain an existing rule without undergoing rulemaking by simply labeling the rule “necessary without substantive public interest.”<sup>30</sup> So, unless the agency intends to alter its rules, we counsel re-labeling them. And because we support the SCC rules in their current form, we urge DENR to label them “necessary without substantive public interest” whenever possible.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

As demonstrated above, 15A NCAC 04B .0116, the Existing Uncovered Areas rule, is necessary because it protects against any undiscovered impact of sedimentation resulting from a land-disturbing activity prior to 1973 and enhances the effectiveness of the Act generally. Similarly, 15A NCAC 04B .0128, the Railroad Rule, is necessary because it seeks to prevent, to the maximum extent allowed under federal law, sedimentation pollution caused by land-disturbing activities conducted by railroad companies. Therefore, we urge the agency to reconsider its initial determination that these rules are “unnecessary,” and instead deem them “necessary without substantive public interest.” In other words, the agency should retain these rule, as currently codified, to implement important water pollution control requirements, and for DENR to fulfill its mandate to administer the SPCA.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this important rule review process. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of our concerns.

Respectfully,

Will Hendrick  
Associate Attorney  
Southern Environmental Law Center

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<sup>29</sup> See N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21 (requiring “rule-making coordinators” to, inter alia, prepare notices of public hearings, ensure compliance with fiscal note requirements, consult with the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and the North Carolina League of Municipalities, coordinate submission of proposed rules to the Governor, and, for many rules, “lead the agency’s efforts in the development and drafting”).

<sup>30</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. § 150B-21.3A(c)(2)e.