



DENR  
*Listening*  
SESSIONS & SURVEYS

**Follow Up Report**  
**To the DENR Listening Sessions and Surveys**  
**Conducted in Fall 2011**

N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources  
December 2012



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## **Introduction**

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In fall 2011, the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources held listening sessions across the state and launched two surveys to gather feedback from staff and customers about ways to improve services and processes. The results of those listening sessions and surveys are detailed in the report, *Results of the 2011 DENR Listening Sessions and Surveys*, March 2012, and include recommendations based on the gathered feedback.

The results and recommendations gathered were used as the basis for developing the improvement actions detailed in this report. This report gives an update on the progress made towards these recommendations by DENR in 2012.

## **Summary of Results of 2011 Listening Sessions and Surveys**

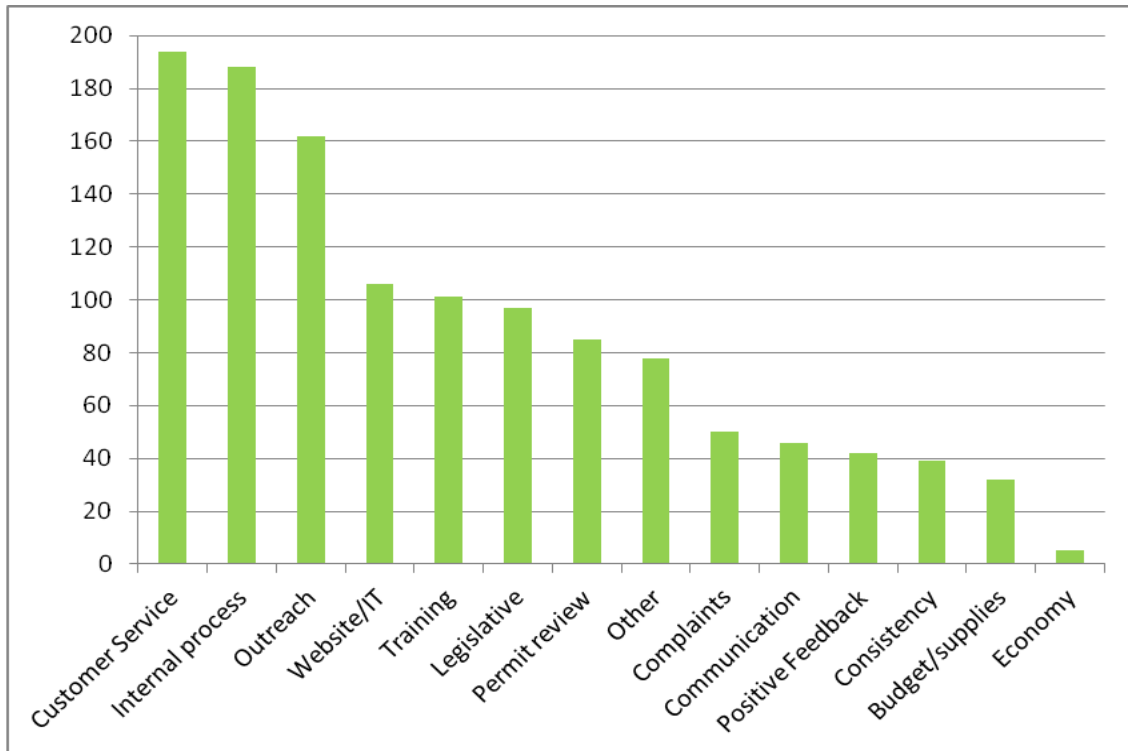
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Of the more than 200 survey responses on each of 18 categories, DENR received an overall rating from its external customers of 3.24 on a scale of 1 to 5, with individual ratings ranging from 2.84 to 3.54. It is encouraging that a majority of those who participated in the survey have had a positive experience with DENR staff and programs.

The department collected more than 900 comments from the listening sessions and open-ended survey comments. These largely solution-based suggestions provide valuable feedback as DENR works to improve its services. The feedback included positive comments about DENR staff and services that reinforced the value of locating regional offices to serve our customers based on regional needs with staff knowledgeable of regional issues and individual customers.

The top seven categories in which we received feedback are:

1. Customer service
2. DENR internal processes
3. Outreach to DENR customers and community
4. Website and technology issues
5. Training of DENR staff
6. Legislative issues
7. Permit review



**Figure 1. Results of the Listening Sessions and Survey Responses by Topic**

Based on feedback, DENR developed a series of recommendations, described in more detail in the March 2012 report, to address these concerns. This report is an update on the improvements undertaken and completed in response to those recommendations, listed below.

### **Recommendations**

The top recommendations for DENR to address the feedback gathered are to:

1. Focus on customer service and assistance
2. Review internal processes for improvement, including permit review processes
3. Increase outreach and education efforts, including regulatory updates, permit and compliance assistance and small business assistance
4. Improve technology and online resources, making online information clear and easy to find
5. Improve staff training
6. Strengthen internal communication and coordination

## Updates by Recommendation

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### **1. Focus on Customer Service and Assistance**

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The largest category of responses was customer service, with 194 responses. The largest subcategory was positive feedback about DENR, and 80 percent of these comments came from external customers. The next largest subcategories were phone issues, communication and website/IT.

Multiple DENR Divisions have made efforts to improve customer service in 2012. Examples include:

- DENR now tracks topics entered into the new DENR portal search engine and the topics of calls coming in on the toll-free customer assistance line. This data is reviewed to determine what information customers most want and to improve delivery of this information to customers.
- The Division of Parks and Recreation developed and implemented a new Orientation Handbook and training program for seasonal staff to improve customer service.
- The Land Quality Section conducted workshops for designers of erosion and sedimentation control plans to keep them abreast of the latest requirements and design standards and to improve compliance. A workshop for delegated local erosion and sedimentation control programs was sponsored by LQS and the Sediment Commission to discuss issues and improve consistency between local programs and the State program.
- In addition to the Department Facebook and Twitter accounts, DENR is increasingly utilizing social media and mobile device apps to improve customer service:
  - The N.C. State Parks' [free mobile app](#) for smartphones and tablets, introduced in early 2011, was significantly upgraded in 2012 and now allows users to navigate state parks using the division's own GIS data for landmarks, facilities and trails for improved visitor safety. An improved alert system also allows the division to communicate directly with park visitors via the app to warn of park closings, dangerous conditions, weather emergencies, etc.
  - The Division of Parks and Recreation refined and expanded its social media outreach, adding a Wordpress blog ([ncstateparks.wordpress.com](http://ncstateparks.wordpress.com)) that offers regular posts and timely news about the state parks system and Division conservation and research efforts.

### **2. Review internal processes for improvement, including permit review processes**

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The second largest category, with 188 responses, was internal process improvement, and permit review processes was another 85 responses. Top subcategories were internal communication, permit coordination, stakeholder outreach, need for innovation, innovation restriction and enforcement consistency. The top concern areas under permit review were sedimentation and related rules, communication, and consistency.

There have been numerous internal process improvements in 2012. Here are a few noteworthy examples:

- The remainder of DENR regulatory Divisions implemented tiered enforcement in 2012, resulting in more compliance assistance before an enforcement action is issued.
- DENR is part of a statewide effort, (mandated by SL2011-0145, HB200) directed by the Office of the State Controller, to identify measures for a coordinated enterprise system to automate workflows through the use of electronic forms and digital signatures. The State erosion and sedimentation control plan review and inspection program has been identified as a pilot for automation. Experience and success from this pilot will then be applied to other types of permits and compliance programs. A workgroup of business staff from each of the DENR regulatory programs was established in August 2012 to ensure timely analysis and progress on environmental permit related projects. This group will provide insight on programs, processes, customers, information needs and outline a course of action that provides a uniform approach, with flexibility to meet state and federal permitting requirements.
- The Division of Water Quality implemented an online renewal process for general permits for Cooling Water.
- DAQ held a special meeting with stakeholders in September 2012 to seek public input on North Carolina's air toxics rules. The meeting was part of DAQ's response to legislation (SL 2012-91) directing the division to review the state air toxics rules and determine whether changes could be made to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden and increase efficient use of DAQ resources while maintaining protection of public health.
- When the Division of Marine Fisheries denies a permit due to significant adverse impacts on fish or fish habitats, suggested changes that would allow the permit to be granted are now communicated to the applicant to reduce overall permit time.
- The Ground Water management Branch improved the Central Coastal Plain Capacity Use Area (CCPCUA) permitting program by adding a paperless application process to existing paperless reporting.
- The Division of Water Quality reauthorized Memorandums of Understanding with both the Division of Coastal Management and the Division of Land Resources to remove program duplication and improve customer service. They also signed an agreement with the Division of Coastal Management to simplify the permitting of certain processes in the Neuse River and Tar-Pamlico River riparian buffer areas.
- The Land Quality Section Mining Program and the Division of Water Quality streamlined the review process for mining permit applications by developing an internal application review checklist to ensure that all pertinent issues are reviewed and documented as addressed by the applicant before a decision can be made on the application.

### **3. Increase outreach and education efforts, including regulatory updates, permit and compliance assistance and small business assistance**

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Most of the 162 outreach responses were about the need for DENR to better advertise or explain what we do or to hold trainings and workshops to educate our customers and the public about environmental laws and how to comply with these laws.

DENR's effort to improve our outreach in 2012 included numerous workshops, presentations, newsletters, and open houses, as well as social media. Trainings offered by the Department ranged from industrial wastewater pretreatment to underground storage tanks to dry cleaners to estuarine shoreline stabilization. Following are other outreach and education efforts.

- DENR held two stakeholder open houses in Wilmington and Winston-Salem in October and November 2012 to gather feedback on ways to improve the permitting process. This feedback will be used to develop and prioritize a plan for permit process improvements.
- DAQ holds regular Outside Involvement Committee meetings with businesses, permitted facilities, consultants, lawyers, environmental groups and other stakeholders. The purpose of these meetings is to inform stakeholders and seek their input regarding DAQ activities, new regulations and other air quality issues.
- In an effort to keep the public informed of the work that is underway with the new Energy Program and MEC, DEMLR has developed a web page with MEC meeting and handout information and information on past and ongoing research and studies on shale gas.
- In addition to regular air quality forecasting by website and email, DAQ is promoting forecasts through social media and an EPA smart phone app and recently added special smoke forecasts during major wildfires.
- DEAO developed a [webpage and brochure on above-ground storage tanks](#) for homeowners, small farms, and small businesses to help prevent spills and to provide information on what to do in the event of a spill.
- In partnership with the NC LID group at NCSU, DWQ will be offering a [free training](#) on low impact development techniques and the relationship to water quality for real estate agents.

#### **4. Improve technology and online resources, making online information clear and easy to find**

Nearly one-third of the 107 responses in this category related to the need for electronic document submission and tracking, and these responses were nearly split between internal (53 percent) and external (47 percent) respondents. Nearly half of responses were in one of three categories related to improving the structure, content, quality of materials or search feature of the website.

2012 website and technology improvements in DENR included:

- The online [Permit Application Tracker](#) system was launched in March 2012 and expanded in October. The Permit Tracker now includes access to the application status of nearly all permits issued by the Division of Water Quality, as well as permits from the Division of Air Quality, Division of Water Resources, and the Public Water Supply Section of the Division of Water Resources. Using this system, the public can now track the processing time of most permits issued by DENR.

- In response to the customer feedback of difficulty in locating forms and other information on DENR's website using the "search" function, the search engine was replaced with a more robust system to help customers find needed information. Additionally, a new [DENR forms page](#) was launched in October, where all customer forms can be found in one location.
- A pilot program in the Ecosystem Enhancement Program allowing electronic payment (E-payment) using PayPoint was successfully completed in January 2013 and will be expanded to the other programs in spring 2013.
- DENR Divisions continue to consolidate their webpages onto the Department's portal website, and to make more documents and information available to the public. Examples include:
  - In 2012, Air Quality launched an online, [map-based, document retrieval](#) system for all air quality permits. Other reports and documents will be added in the future.
  - The Ecosystem Enhancement Program website now has an [interactive map](#) of EEP's nearly 600 mitigation projects across the state, and also posts project documents and financial information for increased transparency.
  - Coastal Management implemented an improved [online database](#) for tracking proposed rule amendments. The database provides a searchable list of all rule amendments in process, and includes background information, relevant documents and rule status.
  - The Division of Fisheries added designated [Anadromous Fish Spawning Areas](#) to the designated Primary Nursery Areas previously available on the website.
  - The Division of Waste Management (DWM) added more GIS maps that improve access to geographic information about [regulated sites in North Carolina](#), including active disaster debris staging sites, brownfields, registered underground storage tanks, and more.

## **5. Improve staff training**

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The responses related to training included a variety of internal training needs, from general job and customer service training to cross-training to legal training. It also included responses about the need to offer training for our customers on how to fill out forms or be in compliance and the need to educate the public about the good work we do in DENR and why environmental regulation is necessary to protect our state's natural resources and public health.

DENR management committed to implement Customer Service Training for all DENR staff in 2013. Additionally, the Managers' Forum and the Employees for Employees Forum held trainings across the state on budget, IT, and human resources issues; development opportunities; legal issues, DENR's carbon footprint initiative, and financial management.

In addition to ongoing staff training on job functions and environmental issues, DENR continues to work to improve training for staff. One example is the Division of Waste Management's Solid Waste Section, which in 2012 designated a point person for staff training to bring greater consistency.



## **6. Strengthen internal communication and coordination**

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The final recommendation came from responses in multiple areas that staff felt could be addressed by improving communication and coordination within DENR. One way this can be achieved is through the sharing of best practices. In addition to the efforts listed earlier in this report, such as MOUs between Divisions and opportunities for training, efforts that have been made in this area include:

- Quarterly meetings on issues that involve multiple divisions, such as the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan meetings.
- Surveys of regulatory staff to help identify outdated or inefficient rules and processes.
- Internal documents to improve interagency review efficiency and consistency, such as the Land Quality Section Mining Program's review form for mining permit applications.
- Regular meetings between staff in different Divisions, such as water quality's meetings with land resources to discuss common project violations, coordinate compliance activities, and ensure appropriate, non-duplicative enforcement.
- An improved framework for internal communication and coordination through regular intra- and inter-agency meetings, and the online improvements discussed in the website and technology section, to improve staff efficiency and consistency.
- A commitment to future surveys, listening sessions, or other feedback opportunities with staff and customers.

## **Future Plans**

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Customer Service is a fundamental philosophy and guiding principle of DENR. As soon as appointed, Secretary Skvarla announced a renewed and expanded commitment to making the agency more customer-friendly. DENR plans to establish a Customer Service Workgroup to address the issue, and all DENR employees will complete initial customer service training in FY 2013-14.

DENR will also continue to automate workflows and offer more electronic permitting, payments and other transactions online. Moving to digital documents, including permit review and issuance, online access to guidance and planning tools and providing for electronic payment of fees will speed up the process, provide convenient and more complete information to the public and provide a long term cost savings.

DENR intends for the listening sessions and surveys to be the beginning of an ongoing process of stakeholder input and continual improvement of service delivery to our regulatory customers and the public. DENR is committed to a collaborative process that identifies opportunities for making environmental programs more efficient, consistent and understandable, while protecting the state's environment and natural resources.