

Partnership for the Environment



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Environmental coalition introduces bill to reform DHEC

In an effort to create a more open, accountable and clearly regulated process for environmental protection in South Carolina, a coalition of lawyers, legislators, community leaders and environmental organizations are pushing a bill that would reform the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). The Partnership for the Environment spent 1998 analyzing DHEC's performance and seeking ways to address the state's recurring environmental problems. That work culminated in the drafting of the Environmental Accountability Act, which today was introduced in both chambers of the state legislature.

The bill would require DHEC's board implement a long-range strategy for preserving the state's natural resources, prepare environmental impact statements on permit decisions and greater public participation in the agency's permitting process. The bill also would require DHEC board members have relevant training and experience in health and environmental-related disciplines to serve on the board, and that public hearings be required on all board appointments.

In a move to address the apparent conflict of interest inherent in DHEC's mission statement, the bill would delete language that charges the agency with promoting industrial development. The bill also would add language to require DHEC to review and consider permit applicants' environmental compliance history before issuing a South Carolina permit.

"The bill states clearly that the mission of the department is concern for and support of good environmental stewardship," said Sen. Phil Leventis (D-Sumter), the bill's sponsor in the state Senate. "The present law puts DHEC in the odd position of being responsible for economic development in addition to its responsibility for safeguarding the environment."

The bill would prevent the kinds of stories citizens across South Carolina tell about how DHEC failed to protect them from hazardous industries locating in their neighborhoods and operating with little or no regulatory review by the agency. Those stories include people like Lula Brown, who lives next door to Interstate Nuclear Services, the nuclear laundry that has operated in Columbia for 25 years.

Brown and her neighbors lived for years without knowing that the facility posed a potential danger, as the company had moved into the neighborhood with no public notice. When the community discovered that it might be at risk — radiation levels on Brown's property was found at rates seven times the recommended standard — residents tried unsuccessfully to have the facility relocate. The Environmental Accountability Act would prevent neighborhoods like this one from being blind-sided by the siting of polluting industries.

Dell Isham, executive director of the state chapter of the Sierra Club, said the proposed legislation would improve public input on environmental decisions. "Citizens are demanding clean air, water, and land to sustain quality of life for themselves and future generations," he said. "This legislation establishes a system to make that possible."

The legislation is long-overdue, said Laurel Suggs, president of the League of Women Voters of South Carolina. "Clearly the need for good jobs that pay a livable wage is a top priority in our state, but poisoning people for profit is unacceptable," she said. "We support this bill and believe the citizens of South Carolina deserve its swift passage."

Supporters of the Environmental Accountability Act plan to spend the summer and fall raising public awareness and lobbying their representatives for support. They expect a legislative victory during the next session.

"I am confident that these key changes could make a tremendous and positive impact on our state, both now and into the distant future," Leventis said. "Our grandchildren will thank us for this initiative."

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