SAFER NOT SICKER

North Carolina Left Exposed

How EPA Rollbacks Are Increasing Pollution Risks and Shifting More of the Burden to North Carolina Families

A Safer, Not Sicker State Report

October 2026

North Carolina Left Exposed

North Carolinians face unseen toxic threats each day in the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food grown across the state, the products they buy, and the places where they live, work, and play. Toxic chemicals are everywhere, and they can cause serious health impacts.

Right now, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is not taking these health risks seriously. Instead, it is weakening important safeguards that protect public health. When EPA weakens protections, the burden does not disappear. It shifts to states, local governments, workers, families, and communities.

No one can stop pollution on their own, and no one should have to. That is why EPA's role matters. EPA sets national health-based standards, provides scientific expertise, supports monitoring and enforcement, and helps ensure polluters are held accountable.

Fewer safeguards from EPA can mean more toxic pollution, slower cleanup, less monitoring, and longer exposure risks for North Carolinians. EPA is loosening regulations on some of the biggest sources of pollution in the state, including:

- **PFAS "Forever Chemicals" Pollution from Industry Waste**
- **Coal Ash Pollution from Coal Power Generation**
- **Waste, Nutrients and Pathogen Pollution from Animal Agriculture**
- **Pesticide Pollution from Crop Agriculture**

When EPA retreats from its duty to protect public health, North Carolina is left holding the bag. North Carolina can and should act to protect its residents, but state and local governments rely on EPA's help to protect people from toxics in the air, water, soil, homes, and workplaces.

This report outlines four major sources of toxic pollution in North Carolina, including where exposure risks are highest, which populations are most impacted, and how EPA decisions to loosen, delay, and eliminate safeguards create greater health risks for North Carolinians while putting a greater responsibility on the state to keep people safe.

BOTTOM LINE

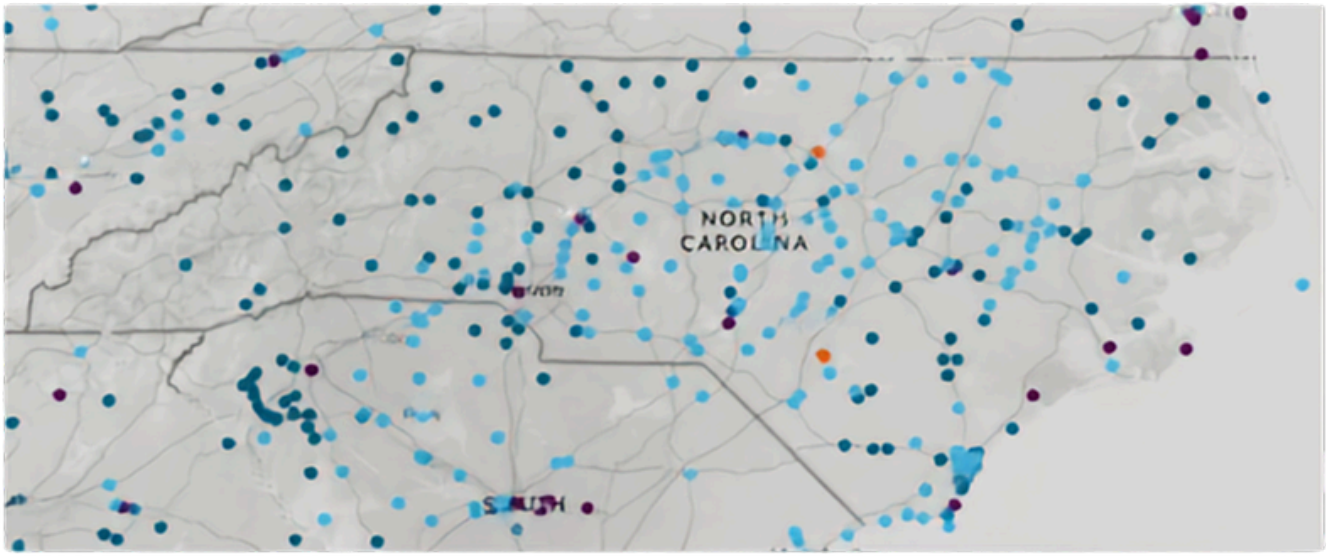
North Carolina is facing toxic pollution risks in drinking water, air, soil, workplaces, homes and communities. EPA rollbacks and delays make those risks harder to prevent and clean up. Families cannot solve this on their own, and North Carolina cannot fully replace EPA's standards, science, enforcement, and funding.

PFAS "Forever Chemicals" Pollution From Industry Waste

"Forever Chemicals," per and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), are manmade chemicals that are found in everything from food and water to consumer products and packaging.[1] In North Carolina, exposure to PFAS mainly comes from drinking water.[2]

Where It Shows Up in North Carolina

The most well-known source of PFAS contamination in the state is the Chemours facility that manufactures chemicals, exposing the Cape Fear River to toxic PFAS pollution.[3] The Chemours facility is responsible for polluting drinking water with the PFAS chemical GenX. But other dangerous PFAS chemicals like PFMOAA, PFO2HxA, and PMPA are even more common in North Carolina's drinking water. [4]



PFAS contamination is not limited to one facility or one community. Testing has identified contamination concerns across the state, with major hotspots near industrial sites, landfills, airports, and military facilities. (Image sourced from Environmental Working Group)

One PFAS chemical, PFNA, is a growing source of concern in North Carolina because it causes health impacts like liver damage and reproductive harm.[5] **EPA completed a health review of PFNA in 2025 but still has not released that information to the public or the state.** This leaves North Carolina regulators with less information to evaluate risks, set protective limits, and explain health concerns to affected communities.

PFAS also reaches North Carolina farmland through biosolids, treated sewage sludge spread as fertilizer. A state pilot study detected PFOS in biosolids and every soil sample collected from fields where biosolids had been applied.[66]

North Carolina decision makers have not yet moved forward with meaningful statewide regulations to reduce the volume of toxic PFAS chemicals in waterways.

Instead, the state is allowing polluters to design their own plans to reduce PFAS toxics.[6] This means that North Carolinians must rely on EPA protections to keep them safe. But as the EPA delays compliance requirements for PFAS water standards and withholds health reviews, North Carolinians remain at risk.

Even when EPA takes enforcement action, North Carolina may be left to secure additional protections for its residents. In June 2026, EPA reached a settlement with Chemours over PFAS pollution in several states, but the agreement did not guarantee funding for North Carolina cleanup. In September, North Carolina secured a separate $590 million agreement with Chemours, DuPont, and Corteva, including $455 million in payments to the state and 11 local governments and a $135 million reserve to ensure continued compliance with the state's 2019 cleanup agreement. While this represents significant progress, it also underscores the burden states face in holding polluters accountable and securing clean drinking water protections that families should be able to count on.

Health Harms

Exposure to PFAS has serious health impacts, including:[9]

- Negative impacts on the learning, growth, and behavior of infants and children,
- Reduced fertility rates in women,
- Thyroid disruption,
- Increased cholesterol,
- Reduced immune function, and
- Increased risk of testicular and kidney cancer.

Who Is Most at Risk

People most vulnerable to PFAS pollution are: [10]

- Living near sources of pollution,
- Living close to industrial facilities,
- Living near military bases and airports,
- Using well water as a drinking source, and
- Firefighters, infants, young children, pregnant and breastfeeding women.[11]

These forever chemicals do not break down in water, which causes long-term exposure risks from legacy industries.[12] PFAS hotspots include areas around Fayetteville, Pittsboro, Greensboro, and near landfills, naval bases, and airports.

EPA Actions Are Increasing Risks

Instead of protecting Americans from PFAS contamination, EPA is increasing exposure by:

- **Delaying compliance for PFAS drinking water standards,**[13] which means some drinking water systems will leave residents exposed to higher risks until 2031.
- **Moving to eliminate federal drinking water limits for GenX and several other PFAS chemicals,** which are known to cause health risks.[14] This will leave North Carolinians unprotected until new state or federal safeguards are in place.
- **Dismantling EPA's Office of Research and Development,** which reduces federal scientific support for state and local governments.[15]
- **Failing to release a completed EPA health review of PFNA,** EPA completed a health review of PFNA in 2025, but still has not released that information to the public or the state.
- **Abandoning progress toward enforceable PFAS limits in biosolids,** instead of finalizing its 2025 draft risk assessment, EPA issued draft voluntary guidance. The guidance acknowledges potential risks by recommending that biosolids not be applied near drinking water sources, places where children under five may play, or crops with greater potential for human exposure. Yet it sets no enforceable PFAS limits or testing requirements, leaving families, farmers, wastewater utilities, and communities responsible for identifying and avoiding potential exposure.[67]

What North Carolina Needs

Even with state and local efforts, EPA's rollbacks on PFAS are dangerous for North Carolinians. North Carolina needs timely EPA science, enforceable drinking water standards, transparent health reviews, and support for pollution monitoring and cleanup so families are not exposed to ongoing risks from drinking and using contaminated water.

What This Means for North Carolina Families

Families may wait longer for safe drinking water treatment while paying for bottled water, private well testing, or home filtration. Families that rely on drinking water from public water utilities will also be paying higher costs for filtration upgrades, footing the bill to clean up industry contamination. Pregnant people, infants, children, and households near contaminated water sources are the most vulnerable.

Community Spotlight
Snow Hill Community in Sampson County

Sampson County shows how toxic risks can pile up in one place. Communities in this part of eastern North Carolina live near some of the state's heaviest concentrations of industrial animal agriculture, while also facing concerns from landfill pollution, PFAS contamination, odors, air emissions, and private well vulnerability.

In the Snow Hill community near the Sampson County Landfill, residents and advocates have pushed for action on toxic PFAS discharges, air and odor concerns, and community-led remediation. The landfill operator has agreed to install treatment systems to limit several PFAS discharges, but this shows why communities need strong federal standards, monitoring, enforcement, and cumulative impact tools.[16] Families should not have to prove one pollutant at a time that the combined burden around them is unsafe.

Coal Ash Pollution From Coal Power Generation

North Carolina's coal ash problem is both a legacy risk and an ongoing risk. Although North Carolina only has four active coal power plants left in the state, the ash generated from decades of burning coal remains a major health risk.[17]

Where It Shows Up in North Carolina

Coal ash is stored in large ponds or dump sites and the toxic chemicals can leach into the groundwater or spread into waterbodies through runoff. This contaminates drinking water sources like wells, rivers, and streams. Coal ash carries toxic chemicals like arsenic, boron, chromium, lead, mercury, lithium, and selenium.[18] It can also become airborne and expose nearby communities to toxic particulate matter.[19]

Coal ash sites remain a long-term risk because toxic metals can contaminate groundwater, surface water, soil, and air. (Image sourced from Earthjustice)

Coal combustion releases harmful air pollutants like sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide. Burning coal also makes fly ash, which are tiny particles that contain coarse particle pollution, and heavy metals like arsenic, iron, chromium, and manganese. Fly ash can have a concentration of metals that is 4-10 times higher than the original coal. This can cause serious health risks, including impacts to respiratory and cardiovascular systems and cancer.[20]

Health Harms

When coal ash contaminates drinking water, it can cause:

- Increased risks of cancer and reproductive harms,
- Neurological damage,
- Increased risks of thyroid diseases,
- Respiratory illness, and
- Delayed learning and growth outcomes for children.

Who Is Most at Risk

People most at risk include:

- Communities living near coal ash ponds or disposal sites,
- Households relying on private wells near contaminated groundwater,
- Workers and residents exposed to coal ash dust, and
- Pregnant women, infants, and children.

EPA Actions Are Increasing Risks

Instead of protecting Americans from coal ash and power plant pollution risks, EPA is increasing exposure by:

- **Encouraging expensive, end-of-life coal plants to stay open against the guidance of state decision-makers,** which will prolong toxic air pollution and dangerous coal ash generation, while costing millions.[21]
- **Weakening regulations that protect communities from toxic wastewater and coal ash-related pollution entering waterways**.[22] Without strong federal standards to limit pollution at the source, it may take the state longer to address water pollution.
- **Relaxing limits on emissions from coal power plants**, which means more toxic chemicals in the air.[23]

What North Carolina Needs

After Duke Energy's Dan River facility contaminated a primary drinking water source with 39,000 tons of toxic coal ash sludge in 2014, Duke Energy entered settlements with North Carolina regulators to address contamination statewide.[24] Now, North Carolina has strict laws for coal ash management[25] and thorough enforcement of coal ash pond cleanups.

39,000 **tons of toxic coal ash sludge released into a primary drinking water source when Duke Energy's Dan River facility failed in 2014**

While North Carolina enforces its own strict cleanup laws, the EPA is moving to relax federal limits on toxic wastewater and harmful air pollution from power plants. EPA's weaker standards force state inspectors to monitor a heavier burden of cross-contamination in air and rivers with fewer federal guardrails.

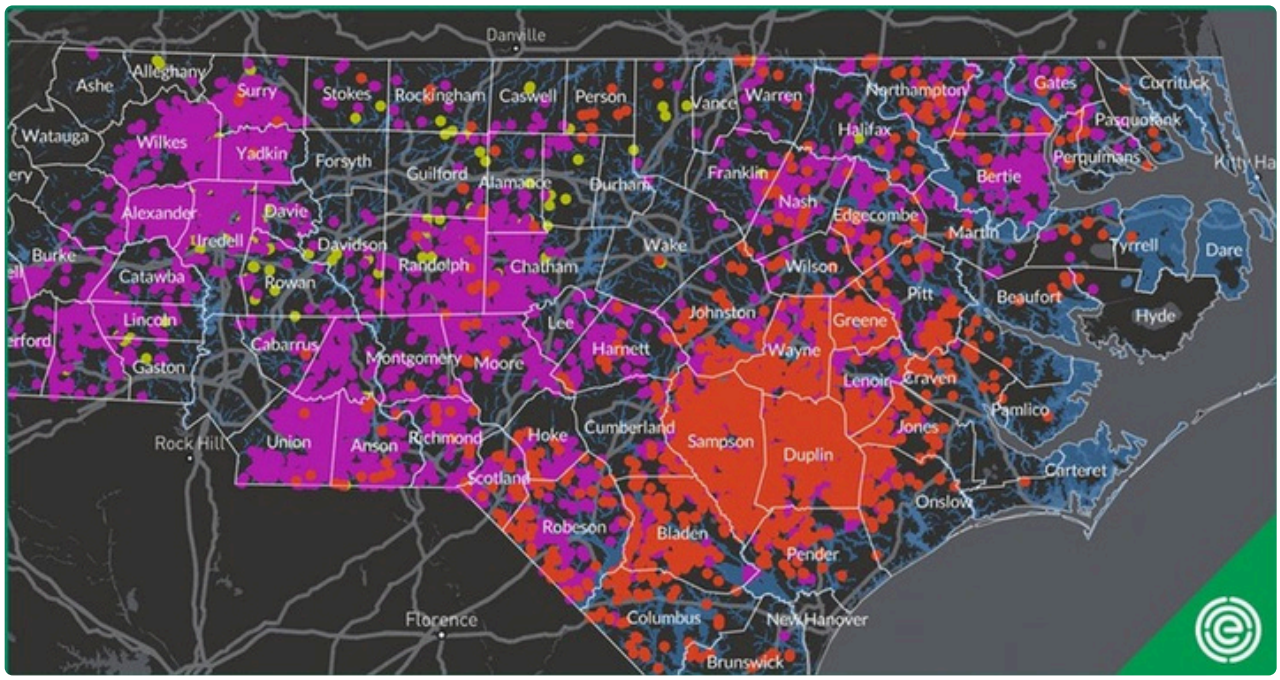
What This Means for North Carolina Families

Coal ash can contaminate groundwater, rivers, and the air near disposal sites. Even where North Carolina has strong cleanup rules, families still need federal protections that limit toxic wastewater, air pollution, and new coal ash generation.

Waste, Nutrient, and Pathogen Pollution From Animal Agriculture

Where It Shows Up in North Carolina

Most hog and poultry farms in North Carolina are Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). CAFOs are large-scale agricultural operations with a lot of livestock on a single farm.[26] CAFOs produce huge amounts of manure and wastewater, which is a serious pollution risk, especially for farmworkers and rural families.



Industrial animal agriculture is heavily concentrated in eastern North Carolina, overlapping with many low-income communities and communities of color. (Image sourced from North Carolina Environmental Justice Network and EWG)

Waste from hog farms is particularly dangerous because the industry continues to use an outdated lagoon and sprayfield system, where the liquid waste is stored in open pits and then sprayed on fields to prevent overflow of the lagoons.[27] That liquid waste floats onto neighboring residential properties, and gets into lakes and rivers through runoff, adding nitrogen, phosphorus, pathogens, hormones, and antibiotics to waterways.[28]

Many CAFOs are on floodplains, which increases pollution exposure during heavy rain events.[29] The open-air liquid waste pits also create air pollution, including hydrogen sulfide and ammonia, which can react to form fine inhalable particulate matter.[30]

Health Harms

Pollution from CAFOs has been linked to serious public health impacts for communities, including:[31]

- Kidney disease,
- Anemia,
- Lower birth weights,
- Impacts to respiratory, cardiovascular, and central nervous systems, and
- Wheezing, allergies, and staph infections.[32]

Who Is Most at Risk

North Carolina communities living near CAFOs have higher mortality rates than the rest of the state. The health risks of CAFOs are especially high for:[33]

- Children,
- Older individuals, and
- People with pre-existing conditions.

CAFOs are often found in low-income communities and communities of color.[34] Low-income communities of color in North Carolina have 10 times the number of CAFOs as other regions, which means higher pollution exposure and greater health impacts.

EPA Actions Are Increasing Risks

Instead of protecting Americans from CAFO Waste, EPA is increasing exposure by:

- **Proposing to reduce the number of waterways that are considered Waters of the United States,**[35] and covered by CAFOs permit requirements.[36] This means fewer waterways are being protected by regulations, but the same amount of pollution being discharged.
- **Reducing staff and science capacity**, leaving states with fewer federal resources to manage permitting, monitoring, and enforcement.[37]
- **Not finalizing methods or regulations to find out how much air pollution CAFOs cause**,[38] despite starting this process in 2005. This leaves states and communities unaware of how much toxic air pollution is being breathed in from CAFO operations.
- **Rescinding environmental justice and equity programs**, including mapping tools to identify which communities are most impacted by pollution.[39]

What North Carolina Needs

Farmworkers and rural families should not be left to manage industrial animal waste pollution on their own. North Carolina needs strong federal water protections, better flood and cumulative impact mapping, and more support for monitoring and enforcement. Though North Carolina has already banned new and expanding hog CAFOs with open lagoons due to pollution risks, the state needs EPA resources to better protect families and workers.[40]

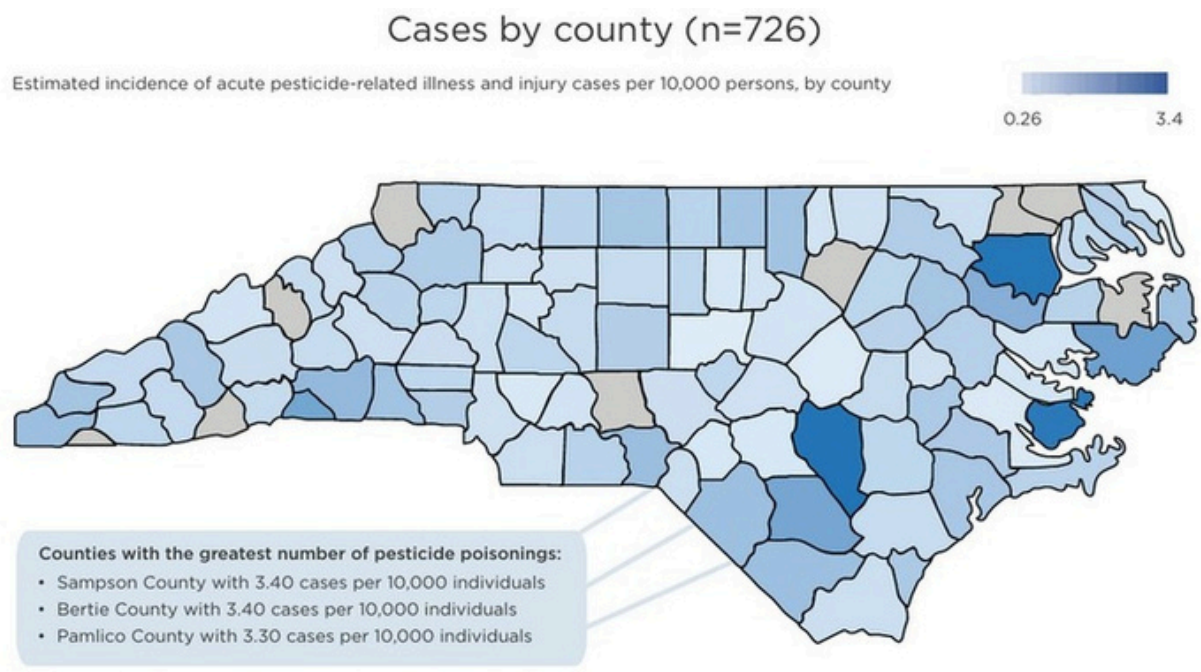
What This Means for North Carolina Families

Industrial animal waste can affect nearby families through odors, air pollution, runoff, and contaminated water, especially after heavy rains and flooding.

Pesticide Pollution From Crop Agriculture

Where It Shows Up in North Carolina

North Carolina is a top agriculture producer nationally, which means heavy pesticide use throughout the state. Farm workers and pesticide applicators are directly exposed to toxic pesticide chemicals through inhalation and skin contact, and community members are exposed when the runoff from crops enters drinking water sources.[41]



Pesticide pollution contaminates the entire state, but most significantly impacts Sampson, Bertie and Pamlico Counties. (Image sourced from NC Department of Health and Human Services)

Who Is Most at Risk

Although pesticides are widely used for agricultural crops, they are still toxic chemicals that can cause real health impacts, especially for vulnerable populations and people with ongoing exposure, including:[42]

- Farm workers, especially migrant farm workers living in housing camps,[43]
- Pesticide applicators,
- Family members of farm workers,
- Communities located near farms,
- Private well owners.

These chemicals are so persistent in the environment that even banned pesticides that are no longer allowed to be used in North Carolina were found in the homes of farm workers.

Health Harms

Pesticide exposure is especially dangerous for farmworkers, pesticide applicators, their families, and nearby communities who may face repeated exposure. These risks include:[44]

- Certain cancers, including stomach, prostate, esophageal, and tongue cancer,[45]
- Nervous system disruption,
- Neurological harm, and
- Hormone and endocrine disruption.

EPA Actions Are Increasing Risks

Instead of protecting Americans from pesticide exposure, EPA is increasing exposure by:

- **Delaying restrictions on pesticides directly linked to negative health outcomes**,[46] which means these dangerous chemicals remain in use despite the health risks.
- **Approving pesticides containing PFAS for use on food crops,**[47] which can increase the risk of exposure for anyone eating pesticide-sprayed crops.
- **Denying the health risks of widely used glyphosate-based pesticides,**[48] despite growing evidence that glyphosate causes increased cancer risks.[49] This administration is now using the Defense Production Act to prioritize production of these dangerous pesticides.[50]

EPA is ignoring scientific findings and delaying or weakening safeguards that would better protect farmworkers, families, and nearby communities from pesticide exposure. North Carolina's pesticide laws often mirror what is set by EPA, rather than being stricter.

This means that when EPA delays enforcement or approves new dangerous pesticides, North Carolinians are left more exposed to harmful pesticides. This is most dangerous for farm workers and rural communities who have higher pesticide exposures.

What North Carolina Needs

These dangerous actions by the EPA make it harder for decision makers in North Carolina to keep people safe from toxic pesticide chemicals. North Carolina needs EPA to act on current science, restrict the most dangerous pesticides, evaluate cumulative risks, and protect farmworkers, families, private well users, and rural communities from repeated exposure.

What This Means for North Carolina Families

Farmworkers, applicators, rural families, and private well users may face repeated pesticide exposure at work, at home, and through water contamination.

Emerging Concerns

North Carolina also faces toxic risks that are not covered in depth in this report but deserve attention. EPA is rolling back regulations, stalling enforcement, and ignoring the health risks of toxic chemicals, which puts people in danger of greater exposure to:

Vehicle Emissions: Vehicles produce nitrogen oxides and fine inhalable particle pollution, which cause respiratory illness, cardiovascular diseases, and increased mortality rates.[51] EPA may allow North Carolina to stop nearly all vehicle emissions testing, reducing one of the tools the state uses to identify and control vehicle pollution.[52] These safeguards are necessary to protect vulnerable people, like the communities of color near the Durham Freeway that experience up to **15 to 35 percent** more pollution than other communities in the state.[53]

Ethylene Oxide Off-gassing: A toxic chemical used to sterilize medical devices and make antifreeze and plastic. Exposure can cause lymphoma and leukemia,[54] neurological effects, and respiratory irritation.[55] In North Carolina, medical warehouses off-gas ethylene oxide, which the EPA does not regulate.[56] The EPA is also stalling enforcement of existing regulations,[57] creating more work for any state that wants to protect the public from this carcinogenic chemical.

1,4-Dioxane: A toxic chemical used for manufacturing that causes kidney and liver damage, nervous system effects, and death. Exposure to 1,4-dioxane can also cause higher rates of miscarriage and stillbirth.[58] The drinking water source for nearly **1 million** North Carolinians is contaminated with dangerously high levels of 1,4-dioxane.[59] But the EPA has no standard to limit 1,4-dioxane in drinking water,[60] which means the state is forced to independently regulate this dangerous chemical.

Data Centers: : Data centers' enormous electricity demand could prolong coal plants and drive new gas generation, while on-site diesel generators add harmful air pollution.[61] In August, North Carolina approved permits for 645 diesel engines supporting Amazon's Richmond County data center. An NC State analysis found that the separate permit applications understated the project's combined potential emissions, raising concerns about local air quality.[62] Citing AI and data-center power demand, EPA extended deadlines for meeting 2024 coal-plant wastewater standards and proposed weakening protections against toxic coal ash leachate by replacing federal treatment requirements with case-by-case limits.[63] Some data centers now bypass federal permits for impacts to streams and wetlands after the Supreme Court narrowed the Clean Water Act.[64] EPA's proposal to eliminate federal public-participation requirements for minor-source air permits would shift more pollution oversight to North Carolina.[65]

How to Reduce Risks for North Carolinians

Pollution from animal and crop agriculture, pesticides, and coal ash is in homes, in drinking water, and in the air throughout North Carolina. Often these toxins are invisible, and by the time they are noticeable, public health is already at risk. North Carolinians should not have to worry about protecting themselves from pollution daily, because EPA has the tools to keep people safe.

EPA rollbacks are already leaving North Carolina with more responsibility to protect residents from toxic pollution. That burden could grow even heavier if federal leaders continue to cut the resources that make state environmental protection possible, like grants to states and Tribes. Ongoing legal fights may also leave communities relying more on EPA protections. This gives states like North Carolina fewer tools to protect families, workers, and communities from health risks.

When federal safeguards weaken, families often pay the price. Families may have to pay for private well testing, bottled water, home filtration, medical appointments, and missed work or school. The loss of federal environmental justice capacity, community grants, and mapping tools makes it even harder for overburdened communities to document risks and get resources and protection before harm occurs.

Even when North Carolina works to protect public health, there are gaps that only the EPA can fill. EPA should do its job by giving North Carolina the standards, science, enforcement, and resources it needs to keep people safer, not sicker. That means:

- ☑ **Stop pollution before families are exposed**
- ☑ **Find pollution faster and hold polluters accountable**
- ☑ **Give North Carolina the tools it needs**

Stop Pollution Before Families Are Exposed

- **Fully implement and defend PFAS drinking water standards and provide timely chemical health reviews** so North Carolina can set protective limits, require polluter cleanup, and help families understand what is in their water.
- **Require polluters to prevent, monitor, disclose, and clean up contamination at the source** to reduce exposure before pollution reaches residents, and families are not left paying extra.
- **Stop delaying and weakening coal ash and power plant wastewater protections** so North Carolina can prevent toxic metals from contaminating rivers, groundwater, and drinking water sources while continuing to clean up legacy coal ash sites.
- **Protect farmworkers, rural families, and private well users from pesticide exposure** by acting on current science, evaluating cumulative risks, and restricting the most dangerous uses to better protect people who face repeated exposure through water contamination.

Find Pollution Faster and Hold Polluters Accountable

- **Rebuild strong federal enforcement against polluters** so North Carolina can rely on EPA and the Department of Justice to inspect facilities, pursue serious violations, deter repeat polluters, and backstop state enforcement when toxic pollution threatens drinking water, air quality, workers, and nearby communities.
- **Expand public air and water monitoring in overburdened communities,** especially near CAFOs, coal ash sites, ethylene oxide sources, and private wells, so North Carolina can detect risks earlier and respond before contamination spreads.
- **Maintain data-driven vehicle emissions testing** so North Carolina can be best informed about existing pollution risks from vehicles across the state, and provide the greatest level of protection for families who live near major roadways.

Give North Carolina the Tools It Needs

- **Restore cumulative impact mapping, environmental justice capacity, and community grants** so North Carolina can better identify communities already facing multiple pollution burdens, direct resources where they are needed most, and protect people before more harm occurs.
- **Rebuild EPA's independent science capacity, including the Office of Research and Development and centralized chemical risk assessment**, so North Carolina can rely on credible, consistent federal science when evaluating toxic chemicals and developing safeguards.
- **Increase and protect funding for grant programs that support state capacity**, so North Carolina is not left to manage growing toxic risks with shrinking resources. These funds help states monitor air and water pollution, enforce environmental laws, respond to emerging contaminants, and provide direct support to communities facing the greatest pollution burdens.

Instead of relaxing regulations on toxic chemicals, the EPA should protect people from toxins in the air, water, and products we use. The EPA can choose to put our health first and hold polluters accountable in order to make people safer, not sicker.

To learn more and take action, visit SaferNotSicker.org.

SAFER NOT SICKER
The EPA must put our health first.

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