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Lenoir violated wastewater rules

Virginia Annable Jul 4, 2018

For the past four years, the city of Lenoir has failed to keep tabs as required on treatment systems at three large industrial wastewater producers, according to N.C. Department of Environmental Quality documents.

The city says that because of staff turnover and new employees, the needed inspections were forgotten.

In June, the city was issued a notice of violation for not completing the inspections of pretreatment systems at any of Lenoir's three significant industrial wastewater producers, Lenoir Mirror Company, BeoCare and Stallergenes Greer.

After the city's wastewater superintendent quit suddenly in early 2017 and a new superintendent took over, NCDEQ officials made a visit in July 2017 and found there were no records of annual inspections since 2014. The new wastewater superintendent, Elisa Triplett, and her staff were reminded of the needed inspections in July and again in September, but still the inspections weren't done, according to the notice of violation.

With a new person taking over the wastewater department, things fell through the cracks, Public Utilities Director Radford Thomas said.

"The transition under the circumstances just made it a little difficult," Thomas said.

The annual inspections check on the systems those companies use to treat their own wastewater before it's put into Lenoir's citywide treatment system, said Vivien Zhong, pretreatment coordinator for the NCDEQ. Inspectors check to make sure there are no chemical spills or leaks, the paperwork is in order, and all their equipment for treating their water still works well.

Testing for contaminants of the water coming from the sites was still done, and none exceeded limits on those contaminants, she said.

An annual report from Lenoir's Gunpowder Creek wastewater plant showed the city missed several required water sample collections for BeoCare and Lenoir Mirror throughout 2017. The water is supposed to be tested at least four times a year for heavy metals such as cadmium nickel, zinc, copper and chromium, but several quarterly samples were missed, according to the report. Especially at Lenoir Mirror, sampling was a "real mess," Triplett wrote in the report.

The samples that were taken didn't show any violations.

Now, Triplett and her staff are working to make sure they all know the requirements and keep to a schedule, Thomas said.

"They've been on a steep learning curve, but even with that we miss a thing or two, but they're learning," he said.

The city was told to send the NCDEQ a letter explaining the missed inspections by the end of June. In that letter, Triplett said the staff has added reminders to their calendars because the inspections were "simply missed."

"For the last year and a half I have been trying to learn all the details of the pretreatment program which requires lots of organization and remembering all the requirements," Triplett wrote.

The NCDEQ also required that the inspections be done by July 24. Thomas said some have been done, and the rest are scheduled to be done in the next two weeks.

Zhong said the NCDEQ chose not to fine the city because of the sudden turnover in the department.

"Since she's new, we understand it's difficult to learn everything in a short time period," she said. "We issued this notice to warn them and tell them in the future it would have more consequences."

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