

Pa. budget should fully fund environmental protection

Gov. Josh Shapiro's Feb. 4 budget proposal did not go far enough to address the need to fund programs in oil and gas, water, air, and hazardous sites cleanup.



Speaker of the House Joanna McClinton (left) and Lt. Gov. Austin Davis (right) are seated behind Gov. Josh Shapiro as he delivers his third budget address to a joint session of the state House and Senate at the state Capitol on Tuesday, Feb. 4, 2025. Tom Gralish / Staff Photographer

by Greg Vitali, For The Inquirer

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While the workload of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has increased dramatically over the past two decades, its staff has shrunk significantly to the point where the department can no longer adequately enforce Pennsylvania's environmental laws and regulations.

Unfortunately, [Gov. Josh Shapiro](#)'s Feb. 4 budget proposal did not go far enough to address this problem. The governor and the Pennsylvania General Assembly, as they negotiate the commonwealth's fiscal year 2025-2026 budget, should allocate more resources to DEP.

In 2002, DEP's authorized complement was [3,211 positions](#). Today it is [down 337 positions to 2,874](#). Yet, since 2002, the responsibilities of the department have increased dramatically with the emergence of the [shale gas industry](#), new federal and state regulatory requirements for [air and water pollution](#), the increasing threat of [toxic "forever chemicals" like PFAS](#), and more.

These four areas desperately need funding and attention:

Oil and gas program

DEP's oil and gas program has regulatory authority over [more than 120,000 active oil and gas wells](#). The program also has responsibility for the plugging of an estimated [100,000 to 560,000](#) orphaned or [abandoned](#) oil and [gas wells](#).

A [December 2022 DEP report](#) found that the improper abandoning of oil and gas wells and the widespread failure to report required drilling activity was almost a routine practice by the conventional drilling industry. This situation continues to this day.

As of January, [up to 1,154 oil and gas wells may have been illegally abandoned](#) since 2022, according to DEP data. These wells can leak methane (a powerful greenhouse gas) and contaminate ground and surface water. During the Shapiro administration, [300 wells have been plugged](#) to date, but wells are being abandoned at more than double the rate they are being plugged.



This Nov. 13, 2019, photo shows part of an abandoned oil drilling project in the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania. Andrew Rush / AP

Wastewater from conventional drilling operations containing toxic chemicals, [including radioactive materials](#), continues to be illegally dumped on gravel roads in drilling areas, putting public health and the environment at risk.

The same [2022 DEP report](#) indicated that “to effectively administer increased oversight of the conventional oil and gas industry’s compliance with Pennsylvania’s environmental laws, DEP will require additional resources ... particularly more field inspectors and enforcement personnel.”

In 2015, the oil and gas program had an authorized complement of 226 positions. Today that complement is down to 190.

Water program

The federal Environmental Protection Agency requires states to inspect streams at least once every 10 years. Unfortunately, the DEP water program only has staffing to inspect Pennsylvania streams [once every 30 years](#). This is unacceptable.



Discharge from a rock mine seeps into a Pennsylvania stream on Nov. 3, 2018. On the left side of the photo, there is a milky-gray substance flowing that environmentalists say supported their allegations that the Specialty Granules rock mine was violating its Clean Water Act permit. [Read more](#) Brent Walls / AP

Last year, DEP released a report showing about [one-third of Pennsylvania's streams](#) — [28,820 miles](#) — have impaired water quality making them unsafe for aquatic life, recreation, fish consumption, or drinking water supply.

Air program

In 2005, DEP's air program had [349 filled positions](#). The program has 89 fewer positions (260) now. According to the air program, its workload has [increased by 30% to 50% over the last two decades](#), driven by the introduction of new federal and state regulatory requirements.



The Jackson family from Pennsauken, N.J., sits along the Camden waterfront with Philadelphia and the Ben Franklin Bridge in a smoky haze in the background on June 7, 2023. Smoke from Canadian wildfires had shrouded much of the Northeast like a fog, and officials in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey have issued air-quality alerts, advising people with respiratory or heart conditions to exercise caution. [Read more](#) Charles Fox / Staff Photographer

The number of state air monitors the air program maintains has dropped from 231 in 2014 to 172 in 2024, according to DEP, due in part to a [lack of staffing and cost-cutting efforts](#).

Hazardous sites cleanup program

DEP's hazardous sites cleanup program needs additional staff and funds to investigate and address sites that have potentially been contaminated with toxic PFAS "forever chemicals." The [flame-retardant foams used by firefighters](#) are of particular concern. The program recently indicated that "there are 50 Fixed Fire Training Facilities where investigation for PFAS contamination has not yet begun, but [may pose threat of contamination](#)."

In 2013, this program had [245 employees](#). Today, that [number is down to 225](#).



A December 2007 photograph pictures catering sterno device's heat triggered the internal foam system in a helicopter hanger at Northeast Philadelphia Airport on Grant Avenue. Courtesy of Mike Bresnan / PFD History Facebook page

The DEP needs more boots on the ground to engage in inspection activity and more compliance personnel to enforce environmental laws and regulations. DEP is not doing its job well now.

Gov. Shapiro must join with the General Assembly in passing a budget this June that provides more resources to DEP so it can properly carry out its mission to protect public health and the environment.

State Rep. Greg Vitali (D., Delaware) is majority chairman of the Pennsylvania House Environmental Committee.