

PA Environment Digest

An Update On Environmental Issues In PA

Edited By: David E. Hess, Crisci Associates

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DEP Secretary: We Must Do A Better Job Communicating, Engaging Stakeholders

In a frank and open conversation this week at DEP's Citizens Advisory Council, interim DEP Secretary Chris Abruzzo said his agency must do a much better job communicating with the public and engaging with all agency stakeholders saying, "we are sometimes our own worst enemy."

Abruzzo said his agency in the past has been defensive about the work being done and he takes seriously the need to improve communication with the public and change how DEP has engaged with stakeholders.

Abruzzo noted he has already reached out to key partners and stakeholders like John Arway, Executive Director of the Fish and Boat Commission, local officials on onlot septic system review and Shawn Garvin, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region III Administrator.

He specifically cited the agency's Marcellus Shale regulatory program describing the agency's attitude in the past as "overly defensive." He said the agency is doing good work and DEP has nothing to hide, but "we must do a better job communicating what we're doing."

"We have very high expectations on industry compliance (with environmental regulations), Abruzzo said, "Were good actors seek to be in compliance, we will help bring them into compliance. Where bad actors intentionally circumvent law or regulation, we will come down hard on those who don't comply."

Since coming to DEP six weeks ago from his position as Deputy Chief of Staff to the Governor, Abruzzo said he has been impressed with the caliber of the programs and the professionalism of the people at DEP.

He noted as a township supervisor himself, he has been on the "good side" and the "not so good side" of DEP's involvement in local issues.



Abruzzo also made a personal commitment to Council to do everything he could to attend every one of their meetings and said he valued Council's input on issues facing the Department.

In response to questions on specific issues, Abruzzo said--

-- **Agency Budget:** He understands well, from his position in the Governor's Office, about how Cabinet Secretaries lobby for increases in budget and staff. He said DEP staff have been making the case for changes to him directly since he's been there. He noted DEP has been particularly hard hit by reductions in the past. [*Note: The Rendell Administration cut [\\$1.4 billion in environmental funding](#) and nearly 20 percent of DEP's staff and left an [11,000 permit review backlog.](#)]*

-- **Lower Susquehanna River Impairment:** Shortly after he came to DEP, Abruzzo said he reached out to John Arway at the Fish and Boat Commission to see how the agencies and their technical staffs could work together to identify the specific causes for the die-off of smallmouth bass in the Lower Susquehanna and the issue of [designating the area as impaired](#).

The result of that contact was to form a focused group of staff from both agencies to work specifically on that issue and he welcomed the Commission's participation in the effort.

He said the rhetoric going back and forth between the two agencies over the last few months has not been productive when there are real problems to solve.

He said he did not want studies of this problem to go on forever, but there were scientific questions about the specific causes of the problem. The last thing, he said, any agency would want to do is impose restrictions that would have no impact on the problem.

-- **Onlot Anti-degradation Rules:** Addressing the controversy over proposed changes to onlot septic system [module review requirements](#) to incorporate anti-degradation reviews in High Quality and Exceptional Value watersheds, Abruzzo said DEP preferred a legislative fix to the problem. He said DEP has provided language incorporated into [House Bill 1325](#) (Maloney-R-Berks) and [Senate Bill 946](#) (Baker-R-Luzerne) which would address the issue.

He said if the General Assembly does not act, DEP will take the comments it received on the proposed regulation during an extended comment period ending June 3, develop final language and then put that language out for additional public review.

He also said he directed agency staff to meet with local and county officials in the areas most affected by the change to sort "fact from fiction" about the proposal so everyone had the same understanding.

He noted there is no substitute for this personal approach to issues.

-- **Appointing a Secretary:** Abruzzo said he did not know when the final decision on a new Secretary for DEP would be made or whether he or someone else would fill that position.

[Click Here](#) for more background on Acting Secretary Abruzzo.