

NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**
Division of Public Health

Environmental Health Section

2024-25 ANNUAL REPORT



Mission Statement

The mission of the Environmental Health Section is to protect people by promoting a safe and healthy environment in partnership with private businesses and public agencies through consistent application of education, best practices and compliance monitoring.

The Environmental Health Section is comprised of the Food Protection and Facilities Branch, Children's Environmental Health Branch, Onsite Water Protection Branch, and the Training and Authorization Program.

Executive Summary

The 2024–25 fiscal year marked continued progress for the Environmental Health Section in protecting public health through regulatory oversight, education and collaboration with local health departments and industry partners. The following highlights this progress:

- The **Food Protection and Facilities Branch** oversaw the largest number of permitted food establishments in state history, with growth returning to pre-pandemic levels.
- The **Swimming Pool, Institution and Tattoo Program** maintained stable pool permitting while experiencing steady growth in tattoo artist permits.
- The **Training and Authorization Program** reflected strong local health department staffing statewide with notable shifts in the types of authorizations issued.
- The **Onsite Water Protection Branch** recorded a significant rebound in wastewater permitting activity, alongside improved reporting compliance from counties.
- The **Lead and Asbestos Branch** advanced statewide mitigation efforts for assessing and remediating lead in water and lead-based paint/asbestos in public schools and child care centers.
- The **Health Hazards Control Unit** (also part of the Lead and Asbestos Branch) continued its oversight of asbestos and lead hazard removal, permitting millions of square feet of asbestos abatement and overseeing substantial growth in lead renovator certifications.

Collectively, these achievements highlight the Section's adaptability, data-driven decision-making and commitment to safeguarding environmental health statewide.

FOOD PROTECTION AND FACILITIES BRANCH

Food Establishment Inspections

The food establishment industry in North Carolina continues to grow, as seen in the most recent establishment numbers. The 49,470 establishments represent the largest number of establishments ever permitted in North Carolina. The rate of growth has also returned to 2.4 percent, which is consistent with growth in previous years and higher than the 2.1 percent increase seen last year. This data shows a net increase of 4,781 restaurants, or 10.7 percent over the last five years, from FY20 (44,689 establishments) to FY25 (49,470 establishments).

	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Establishments	44,689	45,038	46,124	47,303	48,302	49,470
Inspections	67,675	71,126	79,763	90,763	83,871	86,388
Reinspections	602	429	537	667	655	514
Intent to Suspend Permit	992	827	715	1275	1526	1710
Permit Suspensions	588	556	577	1008	1197	1771
Plans Reviewed	673	1040	844	811	927	903

An increase in the number of establishments across North Carolina also means an increase in the amount of regulatory actions required. There has been a change over time in the number of inspections completed, with a

significant decrease from FY23 (90,763 inspections). Last year, with Session Law 2023-137, there was a change in how Category IV facilities are defined in 10A NCAC 46 .0213. This change moved the required inspection frequency from once every three months to once every four months with an educational visit completed in place of the other inspection. This change was expected to cause a decrease in the number of inspections.

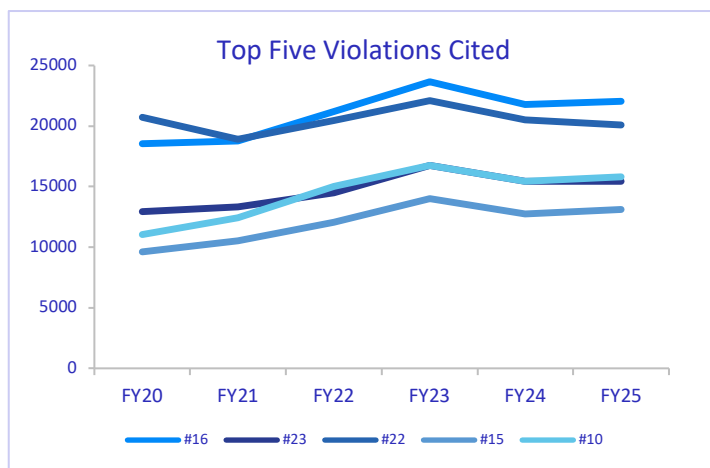
The first year of the law change, which was FY24, there were 10,643 educational visits completed across the state. If this number is added to the number of inspections, it shows a total increase in number of regulatory inspections/visits per establishment of 1.96. For FY25, this number of regulatory inspections/visits is 2.00. Both of these numbers are higher than the previous years (1.73 in FY22 and 1.91 in FY23). It is important to note that this does not include critical violation follow-up visits, complaint investigations or other visits, only the mandated inspections and educational visits.

The breakdown of the 12,312 educational visits completed in FY25 are shown here. It is expected that restaurants would be the highest percentage of these visits because they make up the majority of Category IV establishments.

Establishment Type	Educational Visits (FY25)
Restaurants	8,979
Public School Lunchrooms	1,360
Food Stands	873
Institutional Food Service	558
Mobile Food Units	151
Catered Elderly Nutrition Sites	151
Private School Lunchrooms	109
Educational Food Service	78
Meat Markets	22
Commissaries	17
Elderly Nutrition Sites (with prep)	14
TOTAL	12,312

Inspection Compliance

When looking at “intent to suspend” and “permit suspension” data, there was a significant increase in the number of establishments with suspended permits in FY25. The increase from 1,197 in FY24 to 1,771 in FY25 represents an almost 48 percent increase. A large increase was



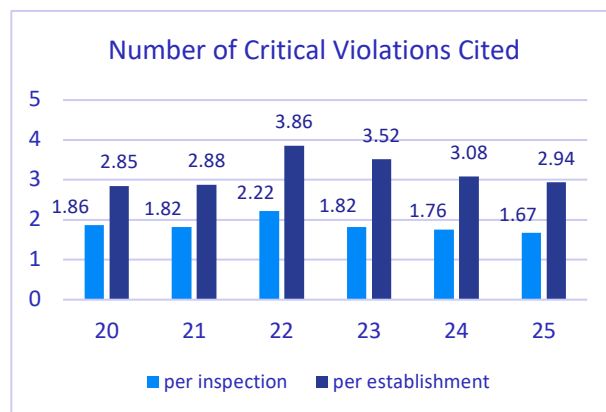
also seen between FY22 and FY23 (78 percent). One possible explanation for this increase could be permits that were suspended during Hurricane Helene, which impacted at least 25 counties in western North Carolina and created imminent hazard conditions in facilities due to damage, power outage or lack of fresh water. Watching this trend over the next several years may determine if this was caused by the hurricane or other factors.

The top five critical violations cited were generally higher in FY25 than the previous year. The exception to that is cold holding violations, which did see a slight decrease over the previous year. One important note is that the fifth most cited violation in the 2024-25 fiscal year was “certified food protection manager” at 14,138 citations. This number is not included in the graph because there is only historical data for the previous two fiscal years as this violation changed with the 2022 NC Food Code update.

While there has been some increase in the top five critical violations cited, the overall total of critical violations cited continues to show a decline. Since the sharp increase in FY22, which is likely due to the change in the NC Food Code in October 2021, there has been a steady decrease in the total number of violations present per food establishment.

Additionally, while the rate of decrease in violations per facility has slowed significantly since FY22 to

FY23, the rate of decrease in violations per inspection was actually higher in FY25 (5 percent) than it was in FY24 (3 percent). All of this points to continuing improvement in rule compliance in food establishments, which supports the overall goal to reduce the burden of foodborne illness in North Carolina.



Swimming Pool, Institution and Tattoo Program

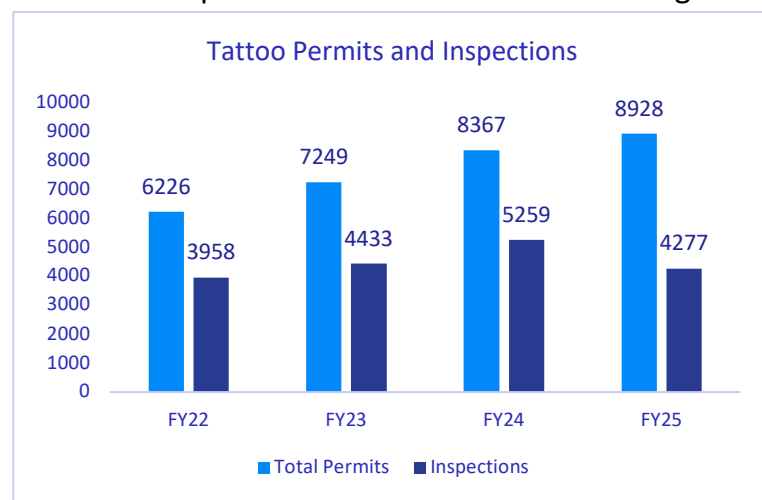
Within the Food Protection and Facilities Branch, the Swimming Pool, Institution and Tattoo Program helps to provide state institution inspections and support for swimming pool and tattoo permits/inspections throughout the state. In the last fiscal year, there were 9,067

	Swimming Pool	Wading Pool	Spa
Total Establishments	9067	1117	923
Inspections	8842	745	727
Reinspections	330	22	22
Intent to Suspend Permit	714	27	102
Permit Suspensions	1159	39	160

permitted swimming pools (seasonal and annual). This is nearly unchanged from the previous fiscal year in which there were 9,049 swimming pools. The number of permit suspensions for these

swimming pools did increase to 12.8 percent, which is one percent higher than FY24. There was a nearly 6 percent decrease in the number of intents to suspend permits issued, down from 757 in the 2023-24 fiscal year to 714 in the current FY25. Permitting and inspecting public swimming pools remains an important priority to protect public health, and monitoring these trends will help to determine priorities or interventions needed to increase compliance.

In addition to permitting and inspecting public swimming pools, the Swimming Pool, Institution and Tattoo Program regulates tattoo artists throughout North Carolina. Regulation of tattoo artists helps to protect against bloodborne diseases and ensures sanitation during the tattooing process. Over the last four years, the number of tattoo permits across North Carolina has grown steadily, increasing over 43 percent from 6,226 permits in FY22 to 8,928 in FY25. During the process of issuing a tattoo permit, all rule requirements are verified to be met. Additional inspections are completed outside of the permitting visit, although these inspections do not count toward compliance percentages for local health departments. The number of inspections completed grew at a slower rate from FY22 to FY24 (33 percent) but



saw a decrease in inspections from the 2023-24 fiscal year to the current fiscal year. The reason for this decrease is unclear but should be monitored over the next several years to determine if this is a continuing trend and whether additional resources are needed for local health departments to complete inspections of all facility types.

Intern Training

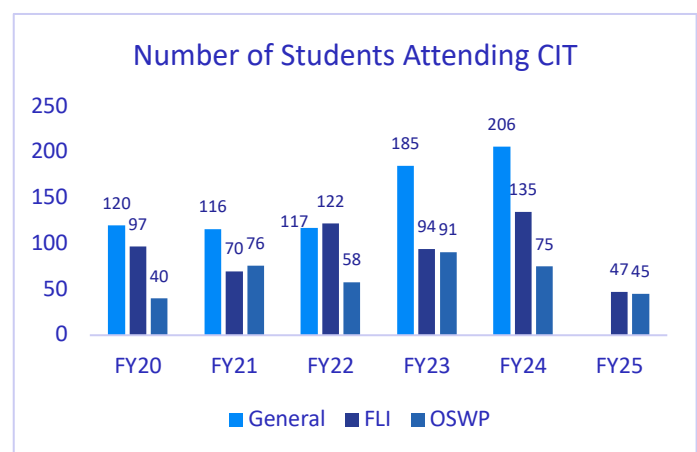
The Environmental Health Section provides delegation of authority (authorizations) for Environmental Health Specialists in North Carolina through the Training and Authorization Program. In total, 571 authorizations were issued by Environmental Health Regional Specialists in FY25. This is a slight increase over FY24, in which 565 authorizations were issued, and both numbers represent significant growth over the previous three fiscal years, which averaged 420

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Child Care and Schools	45	52	43	71	65
Childhood Lead Prevention	18	37	32	35	36
Food Lodging & Institutions (FLI)	78	62	80	109	93
Onsite Wastewater (OSW)	61	62	77	80	91
Public Swimming Pools	60	50	79	108	77
Tattoo	37	93	70	89	93
Private Well	44	111	71	73	116

authorizations. This suggests that hiring and staffing levels have improved since the pandemic. Though the total authorizations for FY24 and FY25 were similar, the types of authorizations issued varied greatly. While there was a

significant decrease in the number of authorizations issued for in the Public Swimming Pool Program (28 percent), there was a large increase in the number of Private Well authorizations (59 percent). The types of authorizations issued provides some insight into the programmatic demand for Environmental Health Specialists for the year.

Before authorization can be approved, Centralized Intern Training (CIT) provides the initial training required for Environmental Health Specialists. During the 2024-25 fiscal year, there was a change in how the CIT Program was administered to interns. Instead of attending a General Module for CIT, interns can now do that portion of the training online and on-demand. This means that there was not a reportable number of interns for General Module in FY25.



However, a significant decline was seen in the number of interns attending the Food, Lodging and Institution and the Onsite Wastewater Protection modules of CIT. It is interesting to note this significant decrease in students, while the number of authorizations did not decrease. There may be a decline in authorizations over time if the numbers of students remain low. Monitoring this trend will help determine if the current CIT process is efficient and whether additional changes are needed to support local health department training.

ONSITE WATER PROTECTION BRANCH

*Onsite Water Protection Branch reports data based on calendar year instead of fiscal year. The following report has been prepared with most recent available data and relies on manually reported numbers from local health departments.

Onsite Water Protection

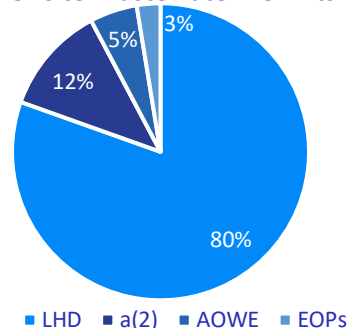
The Onsite Water Protection Branch is actively seeking solutions to improve the monthly activity reporting process so more accurate data can be provided for Onsite Water Protection activities in North Carolina. While the Consolidated Agreement with local health departments requires data reporting, the monthly report submission remains low. There was some improvement in the number of monthly activity reports in the 2024 calendar year. For the 2023 calendar year, only 38 percent of reports were submitted compared to 48 percent of reports submitted in the 2024 calendar year. This amounts to a total of 572 monthly activity reports submitted by 56 of the 100 counties. The number of local health departments that submitted all 12 reports has more than doubled since last year, with 29 counties completing all reports in the 2024 calendar year compared to 13 completed in the 2023 calendar year.

	CY2020*	CY2021*	CY2022	CY2023	CY2024
Total IP Permits Issued (excluding a2's)	25,417	24,084	13,192	9,586	12,472
Total CA Permits Issued (excluding a2's)	30,918	29,343	15,598	12,355	16,378
Total EOPs - NOIs	740	1275	650	386	562
Total EOPs - ATOs			517	481	363
Total COVID-19 Permits	521	971	unsure	unsure	unsure
Total AOWE Permits - NOIs	N/A	N/A	721	606	1155
Total AOWE Permits - ATOs			180	499	696
Total GS130-335(a2) IPs	49 (S40)^	1801 (S40)	1266	1110	2216
Total GS130-335(a2) CAs	29 (S41)^	1639 (S41)	1152	740	2020

^Most monthly activity reports in CY 2020 used an old template and did not track these permits *Extrapolated data, actual numbers not available

After a significant decline in the number of permits issued from 2020 to 2023, there was roughly a 30 percent increase in both improvement permits and construction authorization permits issued in 2024. However, there was a much larger increase in the number of “a2” permits issued, which are “hybrid” permits based on evaluations by licensed soil scientists and professional engineers or an LHD. Looking at total permits issued in North Carolina, 80 percent were issued by the local health department compared to 85 percent in the previous year. The “a2” permits accounted for 12 percent of total permits, up from 7 percent in 2024. It is important to continue monitoring these trends to understand permit demand and ensure local health departments continue to provide the necessary services for onsite wastewater permits.

Total Onsite Wastewater Permits Issued



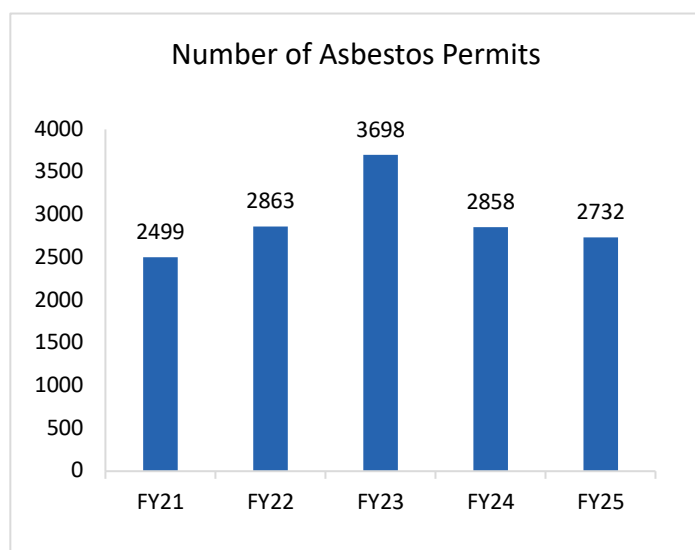
Lead and Asbestos Programs

The Health Hazards Control Unit (HHCU) oversees and enforces regulations for asbestos removal, demolition activities, and lead-based paint abatement and renovation projects across North Carolina. While asbestos and lead-based paint are no longer used in modern construction, thousands of residential, public and commercial structures in the state still contain these materials. In the 2024–25 fiscal year, accredited asbestos professionals, working under HHCU permits, removed

more than 5.8 million square feet of asbestos. HHCU is also responsible for overseeing the renovations and repairs in North Carolina that could result in lead hazards. Lead-based paint, which has been banned

in the U.S. since 1978, continues to pose risks in older homes. Any lead abatement, renovation or repair work in pre-1978 housing and child-occupied facilities must be carried out by North Carolina-certified individuals and firms. The number of lead certifications has more than doubled since FY21, with 350 certifications in the last fiscal year. After a brief increase last year, the number of abatement firms has been consistent over the last five years, ensuring all people in NC have access to professionals when lead abatement is needed. The number of renovators increased 37 percent to 787 in FY25.

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Lead Certifications	159	202	270	343	350
Lead Abatement Firms	73	76	71	85	70
Renovators	468	459	513	571	787
Renovation Firms	1,058	992	947	949	1,039



In the 2024-25 fiscal year, there were 2,732 asbestos permits issued for abatement and demolitions to structures containing asbestos. This was a slight decrease over the previous fiscal year's 2,858 permits. The 2024-25 fiscal year amount is consistent with the normal number of annually permitted jobs in the last five years. However, the increase in the 2023-24 fiscal year's totals is attributed to projects that had been placed on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the 2023-24 fiscal year, there were 639 asbestos inspections conducted

while 635 inspections were conducted in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

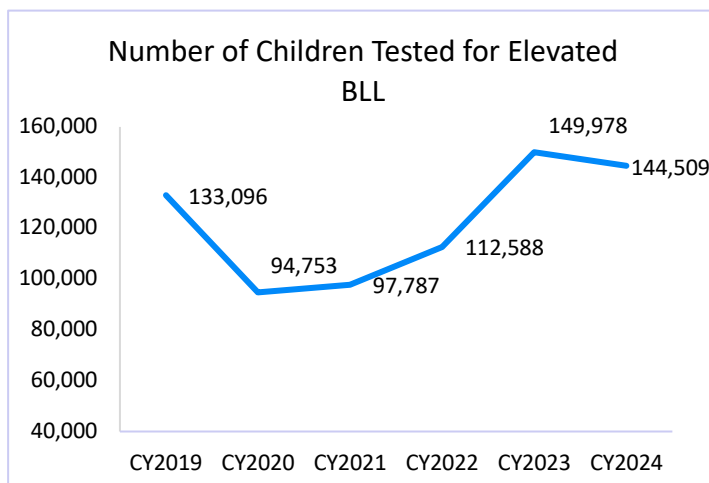
*Children's Environmental Health reports data based on calendar year instead of fiscal year. The following report has been prepared with data through June, 2025.

Childhood Blood Lead Surveillance

Children in North Carolina are tested for potential elevated blood lead levels (BLL). Confirmation of elevated BLL is based on a child receiving two consecutive blood lead test results $\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$ within a 12-month period. Confirmed BLL are based on the confirmation date and are classified according to the highest level confirmed during the calendar year.

The overall number of children ages 1 and 2 years old tested for elevated BLL decreased moderately during the 2024 calendar year. However, the overall trend is still higher than the sharp decrease in 2020 attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic (and the reduced number of routine medical visits during this time) and a recall of point-of-care

(i.e., LeadCare II) blood lead analyzer test kits used by health care providers to analyze blood lead specimens in-house. Distribution of test kits did not resume until the week of February 14 in 2022. In 2024, the number of children tested increased 53% from 2020 and 28% from 2022,



	CY2019	CY2020	CY2021	CY2022	CY2023	CY2024
Number of Children Tested	133,096	94,753	97,787	112,588	149,978	144,509
Number with BLL $\geq 5\mu\text{g/dL}$	1,234	1,049	1,060	1,242	1,636	1,557
Percent BLL $\geq 5\mu\text{g/dL}$	0.93%	1.10%	1.08%	1.10%	1.09%	1.08%

surpassing the number of children tested pre-COVID-19. The percentage of children with an elevated BLL has remained consistent over the past four years despite fluctuations in testing numbers.

While somewhat lower than the previous year, the 2024 calendar year continued the overall significant increase in testing that began in 2023. This increase may have been influenced by increased awareness of elevated BLLs in the media. In October 2023, a nationwide outbreak of lead poisoning among children and subsequent recall of apple-cinnamon puree products followed an investigation that occurred in North Carolina. This recall resulted in several months of news articles, social media posts and other coverage that exposed the public to new and consistent information about blood lead testing. The Section will continue to monitor these testing numbers to track the impact of this recall and outbreak throughout North Carolina. To learn more, please read the MMWR articles found [here](#) and [here](#).

Lead and Asbestos Mitigation in Schools and Child Care

Two programs (lead in water, and lead-based paint/asbestos) were launched with the \$150 million appropriation, allowing the Lead and Asbestos Branch and interagency partners to test for lead in water used for drinking and food preparation at every public school, inspect every public school and licensed child care facility for lead-based paint and asbestos, and provide funding to mitigate identified hazards; water mitigation is provided through the [Clean Classrooms for Carolina Kids](#) program, and lead-based paint/asbestos mitigation is provided through private sector professionals and reimbursed through the [ARPA Asbestos and Lead-Based Paint Reimbursement program](#). This effort involves over 8,000 facilities, all 100 counties, countless environmental health and school staff, and impacts over 200,000 students and staff who attend those facilities. With a year and a half to go, we remain committed to the goal of testing every child care center and school for lead in water and remediating identified hazards, and inspecting every child care center and school for lead-based paint/asbestos hazards and reimbursing as many eligible remediation expenses as possible. Funding for the programs runs through December 31, 2026.

At the end of the first 25 months of the program (May 2023-June 2025), 60% or more of facilities have completed enrollment in at least one program, all identified lead in water hazards were remediated or in the process of being remediated through faucet or fixture replacement, and facilities have been reimbursed more than \$2.6 million for lead-based paint and asbestos remediation, with millions more remaining for facilities to access through the reimbursement process.

For the **lead in water program**, over 4,300 child care facilities and 2,100 schools were enrolled by the end of June 2025. Most child care facilities tested (88%) had a maximum lead level of less than 10 parts per billion (10ppb), the state action level. The remaining 12% had maximum lead levels that exceeded 10 ppb, requiring mitigation such as replacing faucet fixtures. Most schools tested (79%) had a maximum lead level of less than 10ppb; the remaining 21% had maximum lead levels that exceeded 10 ppb.

For the **lead-based paint program**, over 3,300 child care facilities and 1,700 schools were enrolled by the end of June 2025. Most child care facilities inspected (71%) were exempt due to building age (after 1978) and 22% had no hazards identified, leaving 7% with hazards identified. Similarly, most schools inspected (92%) were exempt due to building age and just 3% had hazards identified.

For the **asbestos program**, over 3,200 child care facilities and 1,700 schools were enrolled by the end of June 2025. Most child care facilities inspected (59%) were exempt due to building age and 38% had no hazards identified, leaving just 2% with hazards identified. Similarly, most schools inspected (85%) were exempt due to building age, 11% exempt due to a prior assessment and <1% had hazards identified.

Conclusion

The 2024–25 fiscal year reflects the Environmental Health Section’s ongoing commitment to protecting the public through prevention-focused programs, regulatory enforcement and strategic partnerships. Each branch met the year’s challenges with adaptability and a clear focus on measurable outcomes.

We experienced this growth and progress during a challenging time for western North Carolina in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. Despite the ongoing challenges, the day-to-day environmental health work never slows down, which demonstrates the public value of environmental health in our inspection and permitting processes, risk assessments, emergency response and related activities. The outcomes in this report demonstrate North Carolina’s ability to respond to both ongoing and emerging environmental health issues while maintaining a focus on quality, consistency and accessibility of services. Continued investment in workforce development, data-driven decision-making and cross-agency collaboration will be essential to building on these successes.

Environmental Health Section Leadership

Larry Michael, State Environmental Health Director

Jon Fowlkes, Deputy Environmental Health Director

Shane Smith, Food Protection and Facilities Branch Head

Ed Norman, Lead and Asbestos Branch Head

Wilson Mize, Onsite Water Protection Branch Head