

## Ohio EPA not guarding public, employees say

07/23/02

Julie Carr Smyth  
Plain Dealer Bureau

Columbus

- The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency is "a toothless tiger" - mismanaged, disrespected by those it regulates and ruled by politics, according to a survey of agency employees.

Seventy-two percent of respondents agreed that the agency's decisions are "overly influenced by political considerations." In addition, 53 percent said the needs of individuals and businesses are taking precedence over both the public interest and the condition of Ohio's environment.

"Big-money interests rule every decision," wrote one employee. "This is increasing every day to the point that we do not protect the health of Ohio's citizens."

More than a third of Ohio EPA's 1,112 employees responded to the survey, conducted in April by the Washington, D.C.-based Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. A strong majority of respondents had 10 years' or more experience at the agency.

Nearly a third said they or someone they know has been directed to ignore an environmental law, regulation or violation in the past four years.

Joe Andrews, a spokesman for Gov. Bob Taft, said: "I can tell you that the governor does not condone any state employee overlooking anything that's in Ohio's laws and regulations."

OEPA spokeswoman Heidi Griesmer defended the track record of director Christopher Jones, pointing to statistics showing rivers are cleaner, contaminated sites are fewer, and enforcement actions are up.

She said the agency has closed the troublesome Hardy Road landfill in Akron, blocked development of a mall on protected wetlands in Bainbridge Township and forced the contaminated Buckeye Egg Farm to pay huge fines and spend millions to clean up its operation.

"In an agency this size, employees aren't always aware of everything that's going on to protect the environment," she said.

Still, nearly six in 10 respondents to the survey disagreed that the Ohio EPA "consistently takes enforcement action against serious environmental violators."

One employee wrote: "Staff is forced to be silent, even though they know decisions are being made that are inconsistent with the mission of the agency and the long-term integrity of the environment."

Some employees blamed the Ohio legislature for weakening the agency. A quarter said the agency lacks adequate resources, and 21 percent said the agency fails to effectively defend the environment in legislative battles.

"The Ohio General Assembly has little desire to protect the environment - whether it is passing laws or providing an adequate budget," wrote one employee.

Andrews said the governor stands by the agency. "We feel we're taking the proper steps to keep Ohio environmentally safe."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: [jsmyth@plaind.com](mailto:jsmyth@plaind.com), 1-800-228-8272

© 2002 The Plain Dealer. Used with permission.