

UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20460



EXTERNAL CIVIL RIGHTS COMPLIANCE OFFICE
OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL

January 13, 2022

In Reply Refer to:

EPA Complaint No. 05RNO-21-R4

Blakely Hildebrand
Staff Attorney
Southern Environmental Law Center
601 West Rosemary Street, Suite 200
Chapel Hill, NC 27516
bhildebrand@selcnc.org

Re: Acceptance of Administrative Complaint

Dear Ms. Hildebrand:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), External Civil Rights Compliance Office (ECRCO), is accepting for investigation your administrative complaint filed against the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NC DEQ) received by the EPA on September 27, 2021. The complaint alleges that NC DEQ discriminated against Black, Latino and Native American residents of Duplin and Sampson Counties on the basis of race and national origin in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000(d) *et seq.*, and EPA's nondiscrimination regulation, at 40 C.F.R. Part 7, when on March 31, 2021, NC DEQ issued three (3) individual swine animal waste management system permits and one (1) certificate of coverage, that authorize the construction and operation of anaerobic digestion animal waste treatment systems to produce renewable energy.

Pursuant to EPA's nondiscrimination regulation, ECRCO conducts a preliminary review of administrative complaints to determine acceptance, rejection, or referral to the appropriate Federal agency. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(d)(1). To be accepted for investigation, a complaint must meet the jurisdictional requirements described in the EPA's nondiscrimination regulation. First, the complaint must be in writing. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(b)(1). Second, it must describe an alleged discriminatory act that, if true, may violate the EPA's nondiscrimination regulation (*i.e.*, an alleged discriminatory act based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability). *Id.* Third, it must be filed within 180 days of the alleged discriminatory act. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(b)(2). Finally, the complaint must be filed against an applicant for, or recipient of, EPA

financial assistance that allegedly committed the discriminatory act. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.15.

After careful consideration, ECRCO has determined that the complaint meets the jurisdictional requirements stated above. First, the allegation is in writing. Second, it alleges that discrimination occurred in violation of EPA's nondiscrimination regulation. Third, the alleged discriminatory acts occurred within 180 days of the filing this complaint. Finally, it alleges discriminatory acts by the NC DEQ, which is a recipient of EPA financial assistance.

ECRCO will investigate the following issues:

1. Whether NC DEQ discriminated on the basis of race and national origin against the residents of Duplin and Sampson Counties in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and EPA's implementing regulation at 40 CFR Part 7 by issuing three (3) individual swine animal waste management system permits and one (1) certificate of coverage that authorize the construction and operation of anaerobic digestion animal waste treatment systems to produce renewable energy; and
2. Whether NC DEQ has and is implementing the procedural safeguards required under 40 C.F.R. Parts 5 and 7 that all recipients of federal assistance must have in place to comply with their general nondiscrimination obligations, including specific policies and procedures to ensure meaningful access to the NC DEQ's services, programs, and activities, for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) and individuals with disabilities, and whether the NC DEQ has a public participation policy and process that is consistent with Title VI and the other federal civil rights laws, and EPA's implementing regulation at 40 C.F.R. Parts 5 and 7.¹

The initiation of an investigation of the issues above is not a decision on the merits. ECRCO is a neutral fact finder and will begin its process to gather the relevant information, discuss the matter further with you and NC DEQ, and determine next steps utilizing ECRCO's internal procedures. Generally, the investigation and resolution options and procedures identified in EPA's

¹ *See* Title VI, 42 U.S.C. 2000(d) *et seq.*; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794; *Lau v. Nichols*, 414 U.S. 563, 568-69 (1974) (finding that the government properly required language services to be provided under a recipient's Title VI obligations not to discriminate based on national origin); 40 C.F.R. § 7.35. *See also* U.S. EPA, Guidance to Environmental Protection Agency Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons. 69 FR 35602 (June 25, 2004) (available at https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-02/documents/title_vi_lep_guidance_for_epa_recipients_2004.06.25.pdf); U.S. EPA, Title VI Public Involvement Guidance for EPA Assistance Recipients Administering Environmental Permitting Programs, 71 FR 14207 (March 21, 2006) (available at https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-02/documents/title_vi_public_involvement_guidance_for_epa_recipients_2006.03.21.pdf); U.S. EPA, Procedural Safeguards Checklist for Recipients, at https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-02/documents/procedural_safeguards_checklist_for_recipients_2020.01.pdf (rev. Jan. 2020) (which provides a more detailed explanation of nondiscrimination obligations and best practices); U.S. EPA, Disability Nondiscrimination Plan Sample, at https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2020-02/documents/disability_nondiscrimination_plan_sample_for_recipients_2020.01.pdf. (2017).

nondiscrimination regulation and ECRCO's Case Resolution Manual (CRM) will be utilized for the complaint investigation process. We invite you to review ECRCO's Case Resolution Manual for a more detailed explanation of ECRCO's complaint resolution process, available at https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2021-01/documents/2021.1.5_final_case_resolution_manual_.pdf.

ECRCO is providing NC DEQ with an opportunity to make a written submission responding to, rebutting, or denying the issues that have been accepted for investigation within thirty (30) calendar days of receiving a copy of this letter notifying NC DEQ of the acceptance of Administrative Complaint No. 05RNO-21-R4. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(d)(1)(ii-iii).

EPA's nondiscrimination regulation provides that ECRCO shall attempt to resolve complaints informally whenever possible. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(d)(2). Accordingly, ECRCO will contact the NC DEQ and the Complainants within 10 days of the date of this letter to provide information about ECRCO's complaint process, and to offer and discuss the alternative dispute resolution (ADR)² and informal resolution agreement³ processes as potential options for resolution of the issues which ECRCO has accepted for investigation. If the NC DEQ (and you with respect to ADR) agrees to engage in either of these potential resolution processes, ECRCO will suspend the issuance of preliminary findings within 180 days. In the event that either of these potential resolution processes fails to result in an agreement, ECRCO will notify NC DEQ as well as the Complainants that ECRCO has resumed its process to issue preliminary findings within 180 days of the start of the investigation – excluding any days spent in either of these potential resolution processes.⁴

Please be advised that a copy of the complaint is being provided to the NC DEQ, consistent with 40 C.F.R. § 7.120(e). ECRCO is releasing the complaint with appropriate redactions consistent with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the Privacy Act and will only release identifying information to the extent necessary to comply with 40 C.F.R. Parts 5 and 7.⁵

The EPA regulation prohibits applicants, recipients, and other persons from intimidating, threatening, coercing, or engaging in other discriminatory conduct against anyone because they have either taken action or participated in an action to secure rights protected by the civil rights requirements that we enforce. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.100. Any individual alleging such harassment or intimidation may file a complaint with ECRCO.

If you have questions about this letter, please feel free to contact me at (202)564-9649, by email at dorka.lilian@epa.gov; or Jeryl Covington, Case Manager, at (202)564-7713, by email at covington.jeryl@epa.gov; or Zahra Khan, Case Manager, at (202)564-0460, by email at khan.zahra@epa.gov.

² EPA ECRCO's Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) process involves the formal mediation of a complaint or complaint allegations between the complainant and recipient, through the use of a professionally trained mediator. *See* U.S. EPA, ECRCO Case Resolution Manual, Section 3.3, p.24 (https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01/documents/2021.1.5_final_case_resolution_manual_.pdf).

³ Informal Resolution occurs between ECRCO and the recipient. *See* Case Resolution Manual, Section 3.1, p.22 (https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2021-01/documents/2021.1.5_final_case_resolution_manual_.pdf).

⁴ *See* 40 C.F.R. § 7.115(c).

⁵ Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552(b)(6) and (7)(c) and the Privacy Act of 1974, 5 U.S.C. § 552a.

Sincerely,



Lilian S. Dorka, Director
External Civil Rights Compliance Office
Office of General Counsel

cc: Ariadne Goerke
Deputy Associate General Counsel
Civil Rights & Finance Law Office

John Blevins
Acting Deputy Regional Administrator
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