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## **DAs demand full SBI audit**

The N.C. Conference of District Attorneys wants a thorough accounting of all the problems at the State Bureau of Investigation crime lab.

The district attorneys say they want an independent audit of all sections of the forensic lab so they might feel confident of the work they are presenting to juries.

"Restoring the public's confidence not only in the SBI lab, but our entire system of justice, is our paramount concern, and a full scale audit of the lab is a step in the right direction," said Seth Edwards, president of the conference and the district attorney in Beaufort County.

The request signals some tension between the district attorneys and Attorney General Roy Cooper, who has not called for a full-scale audit of the SBI, which he supervises. For years, Cooper and district attorneys have enjoyed close relations and have worked in tandem on many policy issues.

This month, the SBI has been attacked for delivering shoddy, unscientific work to prosecutors across the state. The News & Observer reported in a series that analysts pushed past the bounds of accepted science to deliver answers that prosecutors needed to secure convictions.

Last week, Cooper released an audit of the lab's blood analysis unit which highlighted a widespread practice of withholding critical test results that may have robbed defendants of a fair trial. Auditors highlighted 230 cases tainted by the practice.

Already, legislators and defense attorneys have been calling for an independent lab, out of the hands of the SBI and the attorney general.

Senate majority leader Marc Basnight said Friday that the financial implications of sorting through all of the issues with the SBI won't be a problem or a concern for legislatures. Their priority: making it right.

"I'm worried about the person who is locked up who may be innocent," Basnight said.

Edwards said the serology audit is not enough to fully understand problems across the lab.

He said that "every case involving the SBI will be scrutinized unless and until a full-scale audit of the lab is performed."

Conference of district attorney officials sent their request to Cooper's office Friday morning. A spokeswoman for the SBI said they have called for an audit of the firearms unit in addition to the DNA section. New SBI director Greg McLeod said a new lab director will enhance the agency's performance.

The conference also appealed to legislators to come up with whatever money is needed to pay for such an audit.

Trust is at stake

District attorneys across the state have worried about how to defend the reputations of their star witnesses - SBI analysts - after the public has heard about bad work at the lab. Some, such as Union County District Attorney John Snyder, launched their own review of all homicide cases in their districts.

McLeod completed his second week in charge of the agency Friday. In July, Cooper removed Robin Pendergraft, who had been SBI director for 10 years, after she struggled to answer questions from The N&O about the lab's operations. McLeod has replaced the head of the lab and called upon a panel of eight lawyers and law enforcement officers to help him look for a new lab director.

McLeod appealed this week to the FBI and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to inspect problem cases in the firearms section. The cases include one highlighted by The N&O in its series "Agents' Secrets."

McLeod has tapped a team of Department of Justice lawyers to help review policies at the lab. The blood unit audit pointed out that the policies of reporting blood tests had never been subjected to a legal review.

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