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## States work at sharing a vital river

### Georgia: Savannah River issues needn't lead to court

By JOEY HOLLEMAN  
[jholleman@thestate.com](mailto:jholleman@thestate.com)

**NORTH CHARLESTON** — Georgia's actions during the past three years prove it doesn't want a water war with South Carolina, according to the director of Georgia's Environmental Protection Division.

"We do not have to go down the path of resolving issues in the courtroom," Carol Couch said Wednesday during a presentation at the South Carolina Water Resources Conference.

Couch heads the Georgia team in the Savannah River Bi-State Task Force appointed by the states' governors in 2005. She and Mike McShane, leader of the S.C. side, discussed the progress and challenges in the shared use of the river.

Couch stressed the accomplishments in the last three years:

- The states are working to make their water regulations mirror each other, which would make later negotiations easier.
- Georgia forced coastal utilities to use more water from rivers and less from the underground aquifer. Growing development had sucked so much water from the fresh-water aquifer that salt water was beginning to seep into aquifer wells on Hilton Head.
- State officials are gathering scientific information to help make the difficult decisions on allocation — basically how much water each state can take from the Savannah and how much treated waste each can put back into it.

Couch expressed concern that some still see a fight rather than a cooperative effort. She felt a comment by S.C. Attorney General Henry McMaster in his speech to the conference Tuesday stoked that misconception.

In discussing S.C.'s water lawsuit against North Carolina, McMaster noted it could set a precedent for the fight with Georgia. "It won't be long before the city of Atlanta will try to run a line to the Savannah," he said.

Couch said such talk makes negotiations more difficult.

"There's a high degree of fear about Atlanta," Couch said. "Fear is alive and well, and it has no factual basis."

In fact, a Georgia law precludes Atlanta from getting water from the Savannah River basin, she said. And while that law could be changed, Georgia residents in Augusta and Savannah would do everything they could to stop such a change, Couch said.

McShane agreed with Couch that much has been done. He said he hopes the task force can come up with some agreement on water allocations before the governors' terms end early in 2011.

"In the two years left in the two administrations, we're not going to get everything resolved," McShane said. "But I hope we're able to set guiding principles."

Alabama and Georgia signed a legal compact decades ago and have been battling the details in court ever since. McShane and Couch want to work out details before a compact is created.

When McShane suggested that goal to U.S. Army Corps of Engineer officials three years ago, they doubted it could be done, simply because it hadn't been done before.

"We don't have a playbook to follow," McShane said.

Couch suggested they might be creating that playbook.

"The Savannah River basin is a microcosm of all of the growth issues we face in the Southeast," she said.

Reach Holleman at (803) 771-8366.

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