



Program spotlights water

Growing demand puts focus on supply issues

By Bo Petersen
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That glass of water you're sipping isn't all yours. On Tuesday, more than 300 researchers and agency and industry officials will take a hard look at how it will be shared.

The S.C. Water Resources Conference takes place in North Charleston, a two-day focus on state water issues surrounding a shrinking supply of water for the Southeast, as well as ways to allocate and conserve that supply.

It's one more gulp of the throat-tightening concept that there soon won't be enough water for utilities, industries and consumers to keep drawing it at will.

The increasing thirst for water in the rapidly developing region, exacerbated by what one state board member characterized as a 10-year drought cycle, already has led to the state filing a lawsuit against North Carolina and an attempt to regulate withdrawals from state waterways that lobbyists stalled in the Legislature last session.

The conference, which is planned as an annual event, is one more move to prepare for the day when drawing water will be licensed like catching fish.

"We're facing a profound cultural shift in the way we use our water resources," said Gene Eidson of the Clemson University Restoration Institute, the conference chairman.

The conference keynote will be a presentation by S.C. Attorney General Henry McMaster on the impact of water issues on the state. McMaster is prosecuting the lawsuit against North Carolina over its proposed water withdrawals from the Catawba River basin that both states share.

Also scheduled is a presentation on the work of the Savannah River Bi-State Task Force, a venture between South Carolina and Georgia to negotiate their way past a similar lawsuit. Nearly all the surface water in South Carolina comes from rivers the state shares with these two states.

The conference will also look at ways to engage everyday people in conserving water and technical advances such as "real time" computer monitoring that would allow South Carolina to allocate its water based on immediate supply and demand.

Allocation is "the elephant in the room," in the words of Mike McShane — how to get

every user at the table in three states to agree how much water they will use. McShane, who will speak at the conference, is a member of the Savannah task force.

The issues are complex enough that North Carolina's proposed transfer of water from the Catawba to the Pee Dee river basins, which would take water from the state's most heavily used source, might provide more water to a South Carolina river that has sorely needed it.

There are few agreeable solutions. Under state permitting plans, the people who use the most water generally would need to make the biggest reductions. Courts tend to decide cases based on who is making the most use of the resource.

"Most people forget there's a tremendous demand on water just to produce energy," Eidson said. "The economic vitality of all the cities in the state is going to depend on water resources."

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