Lawmaker mulls changing water-use law, citing concern over mega-farms

COLUMBIA — A 2,000-acre potato farm taking millions of gallons of water from the South Fork of the Edisto River continues to worry state leaders. State Sen. Robert Hayes looks for lawmakers to revisit the state water permitting law to address the water use of mega-farms – operations larger than 2,000 acres. Talk about changing the law makes farmers anxious. Agriculture has not had to apply for surface water-use permits and Hayes’s concern could open the door to future changes for farmers. Agriculture nationwide accounts for 80 percent of water use.

Mega-farm water use was only one in a cupful of provocative topics raised during the Wednesday morning panel discussion at the two-day 2104 S.C. Water Resources Conference (SCWRC) at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. The conference focuses on the need to develop a statewide water management plan.

When lawyer Geoff Penland went to work at utility Santee Cooper he knew nothing about water policy, he told the audience. It didn’t take long before he learned two sayings that made a lasting impression. The first was Ben Franklin’s observation that “When the well goes dry we learn the worth of water.” The second came from Mark Twain: “Whiskey is for drinking. Water is for fighting.” Penland has come to realize “water policy is interesting.”

An understatement based on the panelists’ views and predictions. Perhaps the biggest challenge the state faces in balancing environmental concerns with economic growth. While the upstate has adequate water supplies, it’s important that South Carolinians keep in touch with neighboring states North Carolina and Georgia, both of which need water, too. The best way is to keep lines of communication open through bi-state committees. Lunch meetings are a lot less expensive than courtroom confrontations. Georgia has spent more than $20 million for water lawsuits involving Alabama and Florida.

About 34 people move to the Lowcountry every day. Providing for residential and business growth is both costly and challenging. Desalinization – processing saltwater into drinking water – looks to become a reality, maybe not for everyday use but in droughts. The Pee Dee region grows 60 percent of the state’s commodity crops, including corn, cotton, soybeans and peanuts. New technology for monitoring ground moisture and precise water use is vital. What’s more,
dredging the Savannah River, removing about 47 feet of river bottom, continues to worry state Sen. Paul Campbell Jr. He spoke about his concern that the digging could puncture underground water resources, and there would be no way to fix the break.

Statewide, the water pipes, storm drains and wastewater treatment plants are aging; some have failed, causing sinkholes and roads to collapse. The bill to fix water systems, like the cost of repairs for roads and bridges, will run into billions of dollars. Lawmakers are looking at charging motorists more to pay for transportation fixes. For water systems, bill hikes are likely as well. The state doesn’t have the money to do the work, according to the panelists. Federal funds have dried up and much of the state budget must go to education and social programs.

The empty wallet leaves little money for water studies vital to improving state water policy and regulations. Water resource planners and environmental advocates push for more stable funding for research. Each of the state’s eight river basins requires monitoring and study. The cost could be as much as $3 million per river system. The current amount in the state budget is $1.2 million. Some lawmakers prefer to piecemeal the work, saying it keeps the researchers accountable – pay for results – and avoids having studies drag on without actionable results.

The Thursday morning panel will feature representatives from state and federal environmental agencies and nonprofit groups.

“We need a focused approach to inform water policy,” said Gene Eidson, director of Clemson University’s Institute of Computational Ecology and SCWRC co-chair. “Currently, South Carolina appears to have abundant water supplies; but recurring droughts present significant challenges.

“In addition, long-term forecasts for population and economic growth warn of conflicting demands for industrial, agricultural, residential and recreational uses. A comprehensive water management plan should address all these needs and support both economic growth and quality of life.”

Senator Paul G. Campbell, Jr. moderated the legislative and business panel. Panelists include:

- Sen. Daniel Verdin - Chairman, Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee
- Sen. Robert W. Hayes, Jr. - Chairman, Senate Banking and Insurance Committee
- Rep. Nelson Hardwick - Chairman, House Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee
• Rep. David Hiott - House Committee Member, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs
• Jeffrey G. Lineberger - Duke Energy, Director of Water Strategy and Hydro Licensing
• Daniel F. Kassis - SCE&G, VP of Customer Relations and Renewables
• Geoff Penland - Santee Cooper, Senior Attorney, State and Federal Government Affairs
• Dyke Spencer - Powdersville Water District, Past Chairman - SCAWWA Water Utility Council
• David Winkles - S.C. Farm Bureau, President / CEO

Gene Eidson will moderate the regulatory agency and nonprofit panel. Panelists include:
• Ken Rentiers - SCDNR, Deputy Director for Land, Water and Conservation
• Chris Thomas - U.S. EPA Region 4, Pollution Control and Implementation Branch Chief, Water Protection Division
• David Wilson - SCDHEC, Bureau of Water Chief
• Dana Beach - Coastal Conservation League, Executive Director
• Hamilton Davis - Coastal Conservation League, Energy and Climate Director
• Mark Robertson - The Nature Conservancy, Director
• Eric Krueger - The Nature Conservancy, Director of Science and Stewardship
• Heather Nix - Upstate Forever, Director of Clean Air and Water Program

The complete conference schedule is at www.scwaterconference.org. The morning panel discussions and speaker interviews will be streamed on the conference website.

The conference includes 33 breakout sessions in five tracks, with 103 presenters from the state's universities, federal and state agencies, environmental engineering consultants, nonprofits and municipalities. Tracks include water policy and planning, river basin and stream systems, stormwater, water quality and monitoring, and coastal and estuarine systems. About 40 posters highlighting research results are on display.

The biennial conference is coordinated by Clemson University’s Institute of Computational Ecology, in conjunction with the Center for Watershed Excellence, and is planned by a statewide committee of water resources professionals. The purpose is to provide an integrated forum to discuss water policies, current research and local management approaches to grow South Carolina’s economy, while preserving our natural resources.
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