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Conserving More with Less

by : Andy Brack

Maybe it's the economy and budget cuts. Maybe it's because there aren't any big, public environmental fights out there now. But the state's conservation movement hasn't been as much in the media lately.

That's not, however, because they're not trying.

"We have been as vocal and working as hard as ever," said Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever in Greenville. "I hadn't really sensed any sense of quiet. But we always have the problem of getting the message out" because of reliance on traditional grassroots efforts, not slick, expensive media.

This year, almost 40 conservation and environmental groups are supporting a Common Agenda that focuses, fittingly enough in a down economy, on creating jobs and economic prosperity to maintain and improve conservation.

"We have tried to be very cognizant of this economy and look for opportunities to make the kind of decisions that put us in play as the economy recovers," said Ann Timberlake, executive director of the Conservation Voters of South Carolina.

On the Common Agenda are things that are low-cost or no-cost that will help protect South Carolina's land, water and air.

Topping the list is continuing the S.C. Conservation Bank, a state organization started last decade. Funding, which is from a part of the state documentary fee on land sales, started in 2004. Through 2009, the bank funded more than \$80 million in grants, which protected more than 152,000 acres of South Carolina land.

The original measure passed to create the Conservation Bank, however, included a sunset clause, which means the bank would close in 2013 unless that clause is extended or deleted.

"That is the only fund that South Carolina has for proactively balancing development of land," Timberland explained. "We [in South Carolina] have done a pretty good job in protecting the most vulnerable ecosystems. What we need to do is protect our working farms and forests.

"There are undercapitalized owners of rural lands who would like to stay in farming," she said, adding that farmers need help from the Conservation Bank to make capital improvements so they can stay in business. "This is not about taking land and tying it up but about reinvesting in our economy."

The cost to keep the doors open at the bank is about \$230,000 a year — a pittance, many would say, for a state where natural resources contribute \$30 billion a year and 230,000 jobs to the economy, according to a 2009 study.

Other items on the Common Agenda:

Green Energy: If the General Assembly created energy incentives for the private sector to invest in offshore wind production, the state could move toward its potential for 20,000 manufacturing jobs and \$80 billion in revenues by 2030.

Recycling: It costs much less to recycle trash (\$30 per ton), compared to landfilling it (\$50 a ton) or burning it (\$75 a ton). In 2009, the recycling industry created 1,354 new jobs with a \$6.5 billion impact and \$300 million in capital investment, according to the Agenda.

By adding a \$3 surcharge to solid waste going into landfills — a nominal charge with South Carolina's comparatively low tipping fees — revenues would help build local recycling programs that will save money in the long run. Recycling is good for the economy, Wyche says, because it creates jobs and is good for the environment.

Clean water: The Agenda calls for a ban on phosphorous detergents — a measure that wouldn't cost anything. Stores would restock with non-phosphorous detergents, as they've done in 15 other states. The result: Your clothes would still get clean, but removing the chemical would cut fish kills in state waters.

Waste treatment: Conservationists also want legislation to clean up a few waste treatment plants that are "responsible for nearly all of South Carolina's costly sewage spills." The cost would be borne by plants with poor records. In one sense, the cost to not deal with poor dumpers is more sewage pollution in our waters.

Bottom line: There's a lot that lawmakers can still do to protect special places without costing a lot of state money.

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