

## Amid concerns, drinking-water law nears completion

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COLUMBIA — A new law that would ensure that South Carolinians who live along the Savannah River don't see their drinking water syphoned off by a thirsty company is approaching its last few hurdles, but not without some of the concerns that have accompanied it from the beginning.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control received 13 submissions from water providers, corporations, the environmental community, and others, including Upstate Forever, Spartanburg Water, Catawba River Water Supply Project, Duke Energy, Progress Energy, the S.C. Manufacturers Alliance, and the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick said the agency's board would hear public comments in December and then decide whether to send the proposed regulations to the S.C. General Assembly for a vote.

The new law and the regulations needed to carry it out create a system for regulating those who take massive amounts of water from lakes, streams, springs, creeks and rivers, including the Savannah River.

The General Assembly passed the Surface Water Withdrawal, Permitting, Use, and Reporting Act in 2010, against objections from industries who worried about limits being placed on the volume of water they could take.

Advocates said the new permitting program would actually help the state's business climate by reassuring prospective companies that South Carolina has a reliable source of water to offer.

The permitting requirement, which imposes a fee of \$1,000-\$7,500, applies to sources within South Carolina and those shared with other states, such as the Savannah River.

Only the biggest guzzlers, using 3 million gallons of water in a single month are affected.

For years Georgia and North Carolina have had their own programs to regulate their precious water.

Upstate Forever, a conservation nonprofit, issued comments to DHEC in support of the new regulations but also asked for some changes, such as the elimination of exemptions for the sand-mining industry and others.

"Upstate Forever believes that these regulations are necessary to protect our state's water resources and will help ensure a viable economic future for businesses, industries, municipalities, and tourism," wrote the environmental group.

Industry groups wanted terms redefined to offer them more leeway, in some cases asking for a single word to be inserted into a sentence. Among two pages of comments from the Manufacturers Alliance was a question about how the permit fees would be set.

The S.C. DNR, which had concerns early in the legislative process, filed eight pages of comments to DHEC, pointing out possible loopholes and loose terms.

Among DNR's questions was how broadly an exemption for farming activities stretches.

"Please clarify whether paper and pulp mills, such as International Paper, Bowater and MeadWestvaco, which are some of the largest surface water users in the state would be considered to be agricultural facilities and thus would be exempt," wrote the DNR.

During the crafting of the law DNR officials had privately worried the agency would not be given a strong enough hand in enforcing safeguards to water bodies under the program to be implemented by DHEC.

The Savannah River is the primary source of water for the Beaufort Jasper Water & Sewer Authority.

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