

Water called key to growth

Greenville seeks new Keowee permit now

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The Greenville Water System fears water supplies in the Savannah River basin could be spoken for by the time it's able to get a new permit to take water out of Lake Keowee.

The system that provides water to most of Greenville County and parts of Pickens, Laurens and Anderson counties — about 450,000 people — is locked in a permit dispute with state regulators in the latest sign of regional tension over water supplies.

Greenville Water draws from two mountain reservoirs that it owns in the Saluda River basin as

well as from Lake Keowee, which was built by Duke Energy and is part of the Savannah River basin.



Bereskin

It's trying to get its first permit under a new law that requires permits of anyone withdrawing from South Carolina's lakes and rivers with few exceptions.

Greenville Water wants to get the 30-year permit right away, clearing the way to withdraw up to 90 million gallons a day from Lake Keowee starting in 2020.

But the state Department of Environmental Health and Control says the water system must wait until its 26-year-old interbasin transfer registration expires in 2016.

By that time, officials with the water system fear, thirsty communities and industrial users on both sides of the border with Georgia may have locked up supplies from the Savannah River basin by getting their own permits, leaving Greenville without enough water to grow.

Trying to avoid that, Greenville Water has taken the permit dispute to an administrative law judge. A hearing has been scheduled for this month.

"We want to resolve it and put it to bed and move forward without this unknown in 2016," said David Bereskin, the water system's chief executive officer.

Bereskin said a lot more claims could be made on water from the Savannah River basin in



Water intakes on Lake Keowee draw 30 million gallons on an average day for the Greenville Water System. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

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the five years that DHEC wants the water system to wait before getting a new permit.

"I know of a company that's looking to build here on the South Carolina side of the Savannah that's going to take 7.5 million gallons a day," he said. "That's one company."

Bereskin said the water system now gets about half its water from Lake Keowee, or 30 million gallons a day on average.

It's important for the water system to draw from Lake Keowee, said John Tynan, a member of the water system board who lobbied for the Surface Water Withdrawal Act as an executive with Upstate Forever, the Greenville-based environmental group.

"Economic development in the Upstate region depends on continuing to have access to a clean and affordable water supply," Tynan said.

Attorneys for DHEC argue in legal papers that they can't give the water system a new permit until 2016 because the new law says the expiration dates of old permits are to remain effective — a position disputed by the water system.

DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick declined to comment on the pending legal case.

Concern about water supplies rose in South Carolina following a 2008 drought that hit the Upstate hard.

The water level in Lake Keowee got so low Duke Energy had to cut output at its hydroelectric station on the lake.

In Georgia, Atlanta was

forced to slash water use by 24 percent, said Jeffery Allen, director of the South Carolina Water Resources Center at Clemson University.

At the same time, South Carolina and North Carolina were arguing over access to water in the Catawba River basin in a case that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court before it was settled last year.

Allen said the better way to settle regional water disputes is through multistate compacts such as those created to divvy up the water in the Colorado and Delaware rivers.

He said growth in the I-85 corridor will continue to put pressure on the Savannah River basin, and he figures South Carolina must eventually strike a deal with Georgia over use of its water.

Atlanta so far hasn't tried to tap the Savannah River, Allen said, because interbasin transfers are illegal under Georgia law.

But Allen said Atlanta's water supply is "kind of tapped out" and it was "looking everywhere" for additional water during the 2008 drought.

"If we get into another severe drought situation like we had in 2008, they have to get their water from somewhere," he said.

Allen said Georgia is in a better position to negotiate over Savannah River water rights than South Carolina because it has a stronger plan for managing water resources.

"It's hard to go to the table when they have all sorts of legislation in place monitoring water use in Georgia and we don't have it in South Carolina," Allen said.

"We can't really tell them what to do if we don't know what we're doing."