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Out-of-state garbage: Controls sought on rising dumps

Governor, conservationists seek to stem flow into South Carolina

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Gov. Mark Sanford and major conservation groups offered plans this week to reduce the flow of garbage to South Carolina from other states.

In his state-of-the-state speech Wednesday, Sanford asked the Legislature to support South Carolina's first ever tipping fee, or charge to bury garbage here. The fee would be \$3 per ton, his spokesman said.

At the same time, a coalition of environmental groups proposed a two-year ban on new landfill permits as the state works to tighten its solid waste regulations.

The plans, still in their infancy, result from a growing unease in South Carolina about mega landfills and out-of-state trash.

Loopholes in state regulations have opened the door for huge landfills and tons of refuse from other states. The State newspaper reported in November. Nearly 30 percent of the municipal garbage buried here comes from other states.

South Carolina legislators adopted a law in 1991 to limit landfills, but critics say regulations produced since then by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control haven't reflected the law's intent.

Together, the state's public and private landfills have twice the capacity the state needs to bury its own garbage, leaving plenty of room for out-of-state waste. People fear landfills will pollute groundwater, produce unpleasant odors and ruin the scenery. One landfill proposed for Williamsburg County would be the nation's seventh largest, environmentalists said this week.

"There is something wrong with mega-dumps being proposed in Cherokee, Williamsburg, Marlboro and other rural counties across our state to handle garbage from places like New York and New Jersey," Sanford told lawmakers in Wednesday's speech.

Rep. Dennis Moss, D-Cherokee, said he is glad the issue is getting attention.

"I think the people's voice has been heard," said Moss, who has fought landfills in his community.

If Sanford can persuade lawmakers to impose the \$3-per-ton fee, South Carolina would charge more than North Carolina and Georgia for the right to dispose of garbage. North Carolina charges \$2 per ton, while Georgia charges 75 cents per ton. The fee would apply to municipal and construction landfills.

Art Braswell, a consultant to waste companies and a former DHEC landfill regulator, said Sanford's plan could divert some waste to North Carolina. If the statewide fees of both Carolinas are roughly the same, governments in the Northeast might not ship garbage as far as South Carolina, he said.

Shelley Robbins, who tracks landfill issues for the environmental group Upstate Forever, doubts the \$3 fee is enough.

Individual landfills in the Northeast charge fees that are sometimes twice as much as individual landfills in South Carolina. A \$3 per-ton state fee in addition to that would not be much, she said.

Sanford spokesman Joel Sawyer said the governor was careful not to make the fee too high because in-state companies and governments would have to pay as well as out-of-state companies. Federal law doesn't allow South Carolina to charge only out-of-state companies.

Sanford's proposed fee would generate about \$25 million annually. Instead of going into the general fund, it would be part of a large income tax relief effort, Sawyer said.

Meanwhile, during a meeting Wednesday, Robbins asked state senators to support the two-year landfill ban.

Robbins serves on a DHEC task force examining whether South Carolina has more capacity to bury garbage than it needs.

Former Rep. Harriet Keyserling of Beaufort said expanding garbage dumps wasn't the intent of the 1991 legislation she sponsored.

"We did aim to have no more landfills built than needed for South Carolina," she said, but in reality the state has been "willing to sell our heritage and our land and our air for other people's benefit, for things they don't want. It sort of adds to our sense of shame."

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