

2010 may be last chance for S.C. water laws, advocates say

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Environmentalists said Wednesday that legislation to protect South Carolina's water resources needs to be approved in 2010 or such protections may not happen for at least a generation.

Several Upstate-area water conservation groups met at the Anderson County Main Library for a strategy session in which Columbia-based conservationist Patrick Moore outlined legislative goals for 2010.

Moore, the legislative director of the Coastal Carolina League, said the state is at the end of the worst drought in 100 years and legislators will need to be constantly reminded that water policy is a priority if action is going to happen.

Legislation that is not approved during 2010 would need to start from scratch and without a major drought fresh in their heads, legislators might not see water issues as a priority, which is why residents should press for changes now, he said.

Upstate Forever Clean Air and Water co-director John Tynan said there was a legislative effort that began in 2002, at the end of the previous drought and it was picked up again in 2006 at the start of the most recent drought.

"This is a unique opportunity with the drought fresh in people's minds," Tynan said. "This can protect our water resources for generations to come. This matters not just to environmentalists and fish, it matters to business, industry and future growth."

There are two major pieces of legislation that could be considered in



A marker indicates the lake is 7 feet deep at the end of the swimming area of the Twin Lakes recreation area of Lake Hartwell.

2010, the advocates said.

Moore talked mostly about a bill, H-542, that would change the 1976 surface water withdrawal rules to institute limits on the amount of water that can be pulled from rivers and lakes in the state. He said no such limits exist.

"Anyone who lives on the water can put a pipe in and they don't need a permit. It's voluntary reporting," Moore said.

The bill would require a permit for those withdrawing more than three million gallons of water a month and tighten the existing voluntary reporting guidelines.

"Water consumption is growing faster (in South Carolina) than the national average," Moore said. "Our population is growing faster than the average and we have very little (water) storage capacity."

He said that fighting constantly with Georgia is no way to solve South Carolina's water issues, but restricting the amount of water that can be taken out of the system could help give consistency to the state's rivers and lakes.



NATHAN GRAY Independent Mail photos

Art Martinez of Westminster plays with his dog, "Sally," at the Twin Lakes recreation area on Lake Hartwell.



Trees that grew when the lake levels were down are now almost submerged at the Twin Lakes recreation area.

The other major proposal, the Comprehensive Statewide Water Management Act, H-3132, is a more

thorough bill including budgetary, regulatory and other aspects of the state's water policy.

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Photos of Lake Hartwell at www.independentmail.com

Mike Massey, past president of the Lake Hartwell Association, said he favors the more comprehensive bill, which would accomplish more, but he also supports the withdrawal limits in the other proposal.

Moore said the comprehensive bill would require the legislature to put up money, which would be difficult under the current economic situation.

He said language to

phase in funding, and regulation, when the budget is more secure could help get the measure approved.

He said the policy has economic development implications because incoming companies need to be able to plan for their water needs for years into the future.

Moore said two other smaller pieces of legislation are also being pursued this year.

Both concern wastewater spills.

The first proposal would require spills exceeding 1,000 gallons to be reported to news media by those who spilled the sewage. The second would impose penalties on frequent wastewater spillers.