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Progress urged on saving river

Advocates, officials say water-use regulations needed to get Catawba off endangered list.

By Dan Huntley
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LAKE WYLIE Eight months after the Catawba was named America's most endangered river, an environmental group says Carolinas legislators have yet to improve management of the 300-mile waterway.

"Closing our eyes to the problem isn't a solution. Sucking our rivers dry isn't a solution. The only real solution is to improve how we manage our water, so that we can protect our economy, environment and quality of life," said Gerrit Jobsis, Southeast regional director for American Rivers, a Washington-based advocacy group that has issued most-endangered lists since 1986.

"Decision-makers in North Carolina and South Carolina should use the coming legislative sessions to implement lasting solutions that embrace sustainable water use and river protection."

Jobsis joined several local elected officials, Catawba Riverkeeper David Merryman and other environmentalists at a Monday news conference on the banks of Lake Wylie.

To get the Catawba off the endangered list, Jobsis said, state lawmakers need to create sensible water supply and water efficiency policies throughout the Catawba-Wateree basin. He also said that statewide water withdrawal regulations need to be adopted.

S.C. Rep. Carl Gullick, R-York County, grew up in Charlotte near the Catawba and now represents Lake Wylie in South Carolina. He said the "most endangered" label has been good because it focuses attention on the Catawba. Gullick helped sponsor legislation last session to create water withdrawal regulations. The bill failed but will be resubmitted in January.

Jobsis said he hopes the N.C. General Assembly will consider a study of possible water regulations completed last month by UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions. The study found North Carolina lacks basic water rules that could help avoid conflict and water shortages during drought.

"I would agree that little has been done since the Catawba got its badge of dishonor," Gullick said. "But I believe change is coming."

Gullick said an example of that change is the lawsuit before the U.S. Supreme Court in which South Carolina has sued North Carolina over piping Catawba water to Concord and Kannapolis, which sit in a separate river basin.

"The bottom line is this problem is not going away until both states set some regulations," Gullick said.

Jobsis says the biggest challenges for the Catawba are brought on by rapid development within the 5,665-square mile Catawba-Wateree basin, which is the most populous in North Carolina. He said unless water conservation practices are put into place, along with regulations governing how much water is withdrawn from the Catawba, the river and the communities along its banks will suffer in coming decades.

An estimated 10 million people visit the river annually to boat, camp, hike and fish – contributing almost \$100 million for recreation-based industries. The Catawba also provides drinking water for more than 1 million people.

Mecklenburg County commissioner Jennifer Roberts spoke at the Monday news conference and acknowledged a lack of progress with water regulations in both states but said it was a complex process.

“We are concerned about the Catawba's designation ... but we got a late start and it was the tail end of the drought. I believe we'll see movement this coming year,” said the two-term Democrat. “The Catawba is an example of how interdependent our two states are. ... There's a sense of urgency to act now on behalf of the Catawba.”

Jobsis said the “most endangered” designation does not mean the Catawba is the most polluted U.S. river but one “at a crossroads” in public policy.

“This isn't a message of doom and gloom, but rather an opportunity for all of us to look in the mirror, and make a substantive and sustainable change in our lives,” Jobsis said. “With wasteful water practices on full display across the Southeast, people can quite literally watch their future go down the drain.”

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mimbru wrote on 12/09/2008 09:52:16 AM:

Smuthrob, I will come right back and say bravo, you are absolutely correct about the bone head thinking. I will add that head up their butts is another safe to describe their thought process. Then they wonder why the northerners look down on us as being redneck lame heads. The proof is in the pudding, or in this case the water.

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smuthrob wrote on 12/09/2008 09:27:06 AM:

The real threat to the Catawba is the state deciding Concord and Kannapolis can extract 10,000 gallons of water a day without a return. That didn't bode well with me or anyone else getting their water from the Catawba. That one act could cause serious water problems for every using the Catawba but Concord and Kannapolis, also allowed to pipe 10,000 gallons a day from the Yadkin, would be sitting pretty while other cities suffer during droughts. That was bone head thinking by the state but what else have you come to expect. I believe the Supreme Court will probably side with South Carolina and save the Catawba River. If that happens I do not see the river disappearing. Environmentalist aren't always right, probably aren't correct most of the time they play chicken little with our lives every day. I guess they are