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Water use across N.C. 'inefficient'

Experts are advising legislature on policies to cope with current and future droughts.

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Conservationists say that the way that N.C. manages its water will handicap its future.

How North Carolina manages its water is handicapping its ability to cope with the ongoing drought or future ones, say experts who are helping guide the state toward new policies.

Bill Holman of Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions and UNC School of Government professor Richard Whisnant are advising a legislative study of how the state uses and shares its water.

Their work, including public hearings and face-to-face meetings with water managers, began months ago in the depths of a drought that still grips most of the state.

Holman and Whisnant recently wrote an online memo of “lessons learned” from the current drought and those discussions. While brief, it raises many of the issues legislators are likely to debate next year, when a full report goes to the influential Environmental Review Commission. An interim report comes out in October.

“Overall, it's fair to say that we're pretty inefficient in this state when it comes to water use,” said Whisnant, who specializes in environmental law and policy. Big improvements in efficiency and in coordinating drought responses are needed, he said.

Water planning in the Catawba River basin, including a new drought-response plan created last year, seems to work well, he and Whisnant concluded.

“They're asking a lot of really good questions,” said Barry Gullet, deputy director of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities, who was among those interviewed. It's particularly useful, he said, to address drought in the context of rates, restrictions and other factors.

Among their observations:

The state has no clear goals for reducing water demand or making better use of water.

No equivalent of the State Energy Plan, a regularly updated guide to energy resources, exists. It's not known how much “new” water the state could save by being more efficient, or what barriers stand in the way. No baselines of current usage exist to compare with future use.

No state plan exists for developing new water supplies.

Proposals for new reservoirs have to run a gauntlet of regulations. But local willingness to plan ahead, forge regional partnerships and raise rates to pay for future water supplies may be a larger problem. A study of increasing supplies is part of a drought-response bill waiting for Gov. Mike Easley's signature.

Better public information on water supplies is needed, especially during droughts.

Drought indicators aren't useful gauges, and descriptions of “safe yield” and days of supply remaining aren't very effective. Would a system of simple status indicators – green, yellow, red – be more help?

Relations between state and local governments fractured as the drought deepened last year.

In the Raleigh area, “time and energy was wasted on shifting or avoiding blame” as water supplies shrank. Most local governments believe they survived with little state help and strongly resent requirements in this year's drought bill to create water-shortage response plans.

(Tom Reeder, new director of the N.C. Division of Water Resources, said the state helped local systems respond to drought last year, such as by arranging connections between water

systems. The new drought bill, he said, gives the state more authority to make local systems plan ahead and conserve water. “That’s a much more active role than we’ve had in the past.”)

State building codes don't reflect advances in water-efficient technology.

Codes are expected to be updated, allowing rainwater to be used to flush toilets, but otherwise have changed little since 1993. Retailers offer far more choices and information about energy efficiency than they do about water-saving appliances and fixtures.

The current way of selling water is a “major barrier” to efficiency and conservation.

Most systems earn their biggest profits by selling more water during the summer, for irrigation and cooling. Rates at more than 60 systems still reward the largest water users, leading to waste. Many public systems don't set rates the way businesses would, and some operate at a loss.

Water restrictions are designed for easy enforcement, not for saving water.

Restrictions of outdoor water use, such as lawn irrigation, lower short-term peaks. But because outdoor watering is only a fraction of total use, they do little to reduce long-term demand. The public gets confused by restrictions that vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Systems without year-round conservation programs lose more money and come closest to running out of water.

Water-supply predictions don't account for a changing world.

Most “safe yield” calculations don't factor in the warming and more intense storms and droughts predicted from climate change. They also don't include increased demand for groundwater, as more private wells are drilled, and the amount of land covered by roads and rooftops that affect groundwater and streams.

Read more and comment on water issues at the UNC School of Government's new “Water Wiki.” It's at www.sog.unc.edu/water/



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