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SAVVY CITIZEN WATER

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Who controls the spigots?

Shortages, growth hasten moves to protect supply

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Know the issue: The draft Water Allocation Study is online at www.ncleg.net/gascripts/DocumentSites/browseDocSite.asp?nID=12. For more on water issues, visit: www.sog.unc.edu/water/.

Attend a discussion: Public hearings, including one in Charlotte, are expected in December and January but have not been scheduled.

- [Biggest water users](#)

Catawba River basin, 2006 (million gallons a day):

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities 98.1

Duke Energy 80.8*

Celanese Acetate 39.5

AbitibiBowater 29.9

City of Hickory 15.9

*Water lost as steam; actual withdrawals are larger

Source: Water Supply Study, Duke Energy, 2006

WASHINGTON For 18 months Charlotteans have put up with drought, brown lawns and water restrictions.

Now comes the hard part.

A state that's been awash in water now faces never-settled decisions about water rights, avoiding conflict and heading off shortages. Those choices become all the more urgent as the population grows and future droughts seem likely.

"The state uses water," says a new report to legislators, "like a person who has no budget spends money."

Next month, lawmakers will begin debate over fundamental changes, including the state's first permitting system for large water users. Ordinary folks can have their say first at public hearings.

High-flying water policies seem likely to sail over the heads of most people – until they're hurt by them.

As it now stands, private companies may legally pump so much water that downstream users or nearby farmers' wells go dry. Towns sometimes don't know their water supplies are shaky until they have to turn away new development. Those in water-starved areas face few options to grow.

Legislators will also be urged to strengthen state oversight of the financial side of local water systems. Those that operate at a loss could be forced to raise rates to balance their budgets.

And while water conservation will play an expanding role in state policy, it begins at the personal level.

When the Sharon Towers retirement community in Charlotte formed a "green" group 18 months ago, water was a conservation goal.

City-imposed water restrictions did a lot to cut consumption, said resident John Offerdahl. But at the group's urging, the community also replaced showerheads and faucets with water-saving fixtures, and installed drip irrigation in shrub beds.

The result: Water use is down by nearly a third.

"Really, it's an educational process," said Offerdahl, a retired Celanese Corp. executive. He said some of the community's 350 residents resisted the changes.

"My grandchildren are certainly much more environmentally aware and conscious than we were. I think it's an evolutionary process."

Preventing shortages

Legislators convene Jan. 28. The recommendations before them came from a study team led by UNC Chapel Hill's Richard Whisnant and Bill Holman of Duke University's Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions.

Most of the suggestions are intended to prevent future water shortages instead of simply reacting to them, as the state now does, Holman said. Disputes are often settled in court.

"We're concerned that without changes in policy, we may find some of our water supplies over-allocated, and we don't have any rules for resolving those conflicts," he said.

With budget problems expected to occupy them, lawmakers are more likely to focus on broad-brush water policy in 2009 rather than details, said Rep. Ruth Samuelson, R-Mecklenburg. Samuelson serves on the legislature's influential Environmental Review Commission, which vets upcoming legislation.

Timing aside, she said, water issues won't go away. "This is the quiet problem," she said, "sort of like termites in your house."

Samuelson says one of the most contentious issues to be debated – a permitting system for large water users – could work in North Carolina, as it does in Georgia, Tennessee and Virginia. The study team recommends requiring permits to draw 100,000 gallons or more a day from lakes, rivers or groundwater.

That would give the state a clearer picture of how much water is used, and where, the study said. Neighbors could comment when permits are issued or renewed.

Duke Energy, whose power plants draw billions of gallons of water a day from the Catawba River basin, said it will work with other water users to "evaluate the benefits and implications" of permits. But the N.C. Farm Bureau, whose members are now required only to report withdrawals of 1 million gallons or more a day, says permits are not needed and would threaten property rights.

"We know there are a lot of people out there very concerned about the state's limiting the ability to use water on their own property," said public policy director Mitch Peele.

Water transfers

The report calls for creating water “budgets” for every river basin, to help predict future shortages and share water fairly. But it disappoints some critics along the Catawba by calling for continued use of basin-to-basin water transfers.

When the state last year awarded Concord and Kannapolis up to 10 million gallons a day from the Catawba, outraged municipalities along the river felt robbed. The loss of water, they said, could hurt economic development and worsen the effects of drought. South Carolina sued North Carolina before the U.S. Supreme Court over the transfer.

Catawba Riverkeeper David Merryman said the study made interbasin transfers seem “a little prettier than they really are.

“They're fundamentally a bad tool. We do need to share our resources in dire times, but other rivers should not be looked at as resources for development and urban growth. You should look at your own resources first.”

In April the advocacy group American Rivers named the Catawba the nation's most endangered river, citing growing demands on it and failed policies to protect it. Little has changed, Merryman said, other than a drought bill passed last summer that requires local conservation plans and lets the governor declare water-shortage emergencies.

Charlotte was also the site of another water skirmish last year. Landscapers, nursery owners, irrigation contractors and grounds managers bitterly fought local restrictions they felt unfairly targeted their water-dependent industry.

But the adversaries eventually turned into partners, said nurseryman Buddy Murrow, an officer on the N.C. Green Industry Council, which represents those trades. The council is now talking with local water agencies about studying ways to cut water use.

“If we don't learn to work together,” Murrow said, “we're going to continue to have these water battles.”



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Dent wrote on 12/08/2008 08:55:08 AM:

The graph in the paper version doesn't make any sense. County Water are non-profit so wouldn't extra money go to improvements? What about private water

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