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Carolinas stuck in water wars

Western experts say tensions aren't bad

By Bruce Henderson - McClatchy Newspapers

CHARLOTTE -- With the Carolinas deadlocked on how to share the Catawba River, a two-state river commission turned Friday to more experienced hands from a western state.

Water wars have been part of the West since cowpunchers began herding dogies. Two academics brought in from Colorado have helped defuse water disputes from New Mexico to Florida.

Their diagnosis: Animosities over the Catawba haven't reached the boiling point that have kept states like Georgia, Florida and Alabama locked in court fights for more than a decade.

"You're not in the ditch yet," said Douglas Kenney, a University of Colorado water expert.

By the end of the four-hour meeting in Huntersville, state legislators who sit on the Catawba-Waterree River Basin Commission had taken the first steps toward negotiating a truce over the Catawba. They agreed to draw up a list of differences that could be resolved by a formal agreement.

Drought has only deepened tension over the 225-mile Catawba, which flows across the S.C. line south of Charlotte.

In a case now before the U.S. Supreme Court, South Carolina sued North Carolina last summer for piping water out of the Catawba basin to Concord and Kannapolis. South Carolina says it had no voice in the decision and will be left with too little water.

Residents of the upper Catawba, watching Lake James drop as drought deepens, worry that such decisions will also leave their communities dry.

And while Duke Energy gained broad support to renew the federal license under which it manages the Catawba, potentially powerful naysayers - including state and federal agencies - still lurk.

A new license, which will specify how much water flows across the state line, isn't expected until late 2009.

Legal agreements for sharing water most often take the form of interstate compacts that are signed by state legislatures, Kenney said. The best are flexible enough to change as new conditions, such as drought, arise.

Kenney and his colleague, Colorado State University professor Neil Grigg, cautioned Catawba officials to focus on broad issues - how much water flows into South Carolina - instead of specific fights such as those over interbasin transfers.

"What frightens the devil out of most of us in the basin," said Lake Waterree resident Gary Faulkenberry, "is the challenge of growth."

Duke Energy estimates that the amount of water pumped out of the Catawba, but never returned to the basin, will grow from 170 million gallons a day in 2005, to 458 million gallons a day in 2058.

Lake Waterree resident



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