

Edisto River Conflict Reveals Need for Greater Protection of SC's Rivers



California is facing one of the worst water crises in its history. The state's drought has drawn down lakes, rivers and reservoirs that are needed for industry, agriculture and drinking water. A number of communities will run out of water in forty- to sixty-days if there is no rain. If South Carolina does not plan carefully for the future use of its water, it may face the same crisis. We will be forced to choose among agricultural, industrial and recreational use and habitat protection, as is happening in California.

The Walther potato farm issue has drawn attention to the fact that South Carolina's affordable land, plentiful waters and lax regulations are attracting large mega-farms and corporate agriculture to our state. Until 2010, we did not even have a law regulating the amount that could be withdrawn from our surface waters. Now we are faced with a situation where billions of gallons can be siphoned off without even as much as a public debate. The South Carolina Sierra Club strongly disagrees with this. We believe the 2010 Surface Water Withdrawal Act must be changed. A balance must be struck now to protect the future of water resource use in our state so that we do not end up facing the same crisis as California. No one can accurately predict the weather in our rapidly changing climate. We must be prepared for all possible scenarios, including the level of severe drought we are seeing in other parts of the country.

We are calling for the following measures to be taken, as we examine the best plan for sustainable use of South Carolina's waters and support reform of the Surface Water Withdrawal Act to ensure:

1. Protection of our streams and rivers as a "public trust" for use and enjoyment
2. A permit is required for all large agricultural withdrawals over three-million-g

3. Mandatory contingency plans for alternative water sources to protect the river
4. Preservation of natural seasonal cycles of flooding and low flows, essential
5. A moratorium on all new large agricultural withdrawals until thorough review

