



Officials want role in Duke Power study that could lead to water fees

By [Caroline Brustad](#) The Herald (rock Hill, SC)
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Local residents could someday see higher water bills if Duke Power starts requiring area water suppliers to pay a special fee.

That's why some local officials say they'd like more direct involvement in an upcoming water supply study that will examine the pros and cons of charging such a fee to city utilities or industries that withdraw water from area lakes, including Lake Wylie.

The so-called water withdrawal impact fees are being considered as part of a study of the area's long-term water supply needs, as well as drought management. The study is one of 31 being done in connection with Duke Power's efforts to renew licenses on 13 hydroelectric plants along a 220-mile stretch of the Catawba River. The Charlotte-based power company controls river flow and lake levels.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission requires all nonfederal hydroelectric projects get a new license when the existing one expires. Duke's expires in 2008.

While many hydroelectric power firms charge water withdrawal fees, Duke does not. The company hired a consulting firm to conduct the water supply study, including gathering information about fees.

But Rock Hill officials say they don't want the study lumped in with the other relicensing studies because of the potential impact it could have on the city and its 25,000 water customers.

"I don't think Duke appreciates how important this is to us," Rock Hill City Manager Carey Smith said. "It involves our water supply. We just think there should be more collaboration between Duke and the cities than has been shown to date."

The Catawba Regional Council of Governments, a group that assists local governments on planning and other issues, recently approved a resolution asking Duke to conduct a "separate and distinct" study that involves affected elected officials and councils of government from both Carolinas. The Catawba Regional Council of Governments represents four South Carolina counties, including York County.

Duke officials say they've considered this request but decided the study should be tied into the relicensing process. The intent of relicensing is to resolve effects related to the operation of a hydroelectric project's powerhouses and reservoirs. These issues usually include effects on fish and wildlife habitats, water quality and cultural, historical and archeological resources.

The water supply study will include gathering information on drinking water needs for the next 50 years and proposing plans for dealing with low-water situations. During a five-year drought that ended in 2003, some S.C. rivers -- including the Pee Dee -- almost ran dry. Duke was credited for carefully managing its water sources during that time.

Water withdrawal fees are just one small piece of the study, said Mark Oakley, Duke's relicensing project manager. The consultants won't offer a recommendation on whether the fees should be charged, they'll just provide information on the issue, he said.

Questions that must be answered include how the fees would be charged and how much they'd amount to.

If water withdrawal fees were implemented, they likely wouldn't be put in place for several years, Oakley said.

He added the study will include input from many sources.

A 13-member advisory team that includes representatives from Rock Hill, York and York County, will provide technical assistance to the consultants. The study results also will be shared with interested parties, known as stakeholders.

Still, some city officials fear they'll be left out of the loop in the decision-making process.

"We need to have more say on the front end," Smith said, adding that he'll continue to fight for a separate study.

Water supply has been a hot issue in York County for decades. Since 2001, the county and several area cities have been discussing ways to improve cooperation on water issues. Current water systems are convoluted, often resulting in higher rates, officials say.

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