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Gerrit Jöbbsis of the S.C. Coastal Conservation League talks about the area below the Great Falls dam. The river has been mostly dry since Duke Power diverted water toward eastern Chester County when the Great Falls hydroelectric station was built in 1907.

Water Gate

Boating, nature enthusiasts,

By [Andrew J. Skerritt](#) The Herald (Rock Hill, SC)
(Published March 23, 2003)

GREAT FALLS -- On a recent damp morning, hours after weekend showers had ceased, the Catawba River flowed dark brown, muddy and high.

Below the massive Fishing Creek dam, gulls sat atop rocks waiting for fish as they emerged from the huge hydroelectric turbines.

Several hundred yards downstream, water flowed over a smaller dam, creating pools in a dry river bed dominated by gigantic rocks. Dead fish lodged between limbs of stunted trees now growing in the river bed serve as evidence of the receding flood waters. This parched river bed was part of the Catawba left dry after the Duke diverted water toward eastern Chester County when the Great Falls hydroelectric station was built in 1907.

If conservationists and boating enthusiasts get their way, water would again come cascading over those boulders, creating rapids for canoeing and white water rafting.

As part of discussions leading up to Duke Power relicensing its 13 hydroelectric stations along the 220-mile Catawba River, activists want to see the original channel filled again -- even if it means asking the utility to remove a 1,500-foot diversion dam that shunts water to the Great Falls and Dearborn hydrostations.

"We would like to see as much flow restored as possible," said Gerrit Jöbbsis of the S.C. Coastal Conservation League, part of a coalition of groups, local, state and federal agencies participating in the relicensing discussions. "We would like to see if it's worth taking down the dam. This is going to be an important recreational feature."

The Dearborn and Great Falls hydrostations generate 45 and 24 megawatts of power respectively, enough power to serve about 16,500 homes a month, Duke officials said. Without the diversion dam, the hydrostations are useless.

"I can't imagine the scenario where we would remove the diversion dam at Great Falls," said Jeff Lineberger, Duke's manager for relicensing. Lineberger, however, left open the door for a compromise.

"It doesn't mean there won't be any flow put in there. But if we remove that dam, it takes two hydrostations out of service," he said. "It's a significant negative impact that would outweigh the positive."

Contentious issue

The restoration of Great Falls and its cascades is one of dozens of potentially contentious issues that will be on the table over the next five years as Duke prepares for the 2008 relicensing of its 804.9-megawatt Catawba-Wateree Hydroelectric Project. Recreational users want more boat launches and places to fish, swim, hike and camp along the 1,700 miles of lake and river shorelines in the Catawba basin. Conservationists want to see less shoreline development, an issue for which they have criticized Crescent Resources, Duke Energy's development subsidiary.

As part of the relicensing process, the utility will hold two public informational meetings Monday at the Baxter Hood Center in Rock Hill. Meetings are designed to give the public a chance to air their concerns about the Catawba and how Duke manages the river basin's water and land resources.

The sessions, which have been held in Hickory, N.C., Mooresville, N.C., and Lugoff, are designed for people to have real input.

"The relicensing is about the people owning the water, the people owning the river," said Catawba Riverkeeper Donna Lisenby.

Relicensing discussions heat up at a crucial time in the life of the Catawba, which runs through 14 counties in the Carolinas, supplies drinking water to more than 1 million people and produces half of Duke's electricity.

The company was founded a century ago as a generator of hydroelectric power. But since the development of nuclear and coal-fired power plants, the utility's hydroelectric plants now provide mostly peak power -- the extra electricity needed to keep air conditioners running on hot summer afternoons. When the hydros come on, reservoir water surges through their turbines and downstream. When the plants shut down, the river subsides.

State agencies want Duke to release a little water all the time. The amount would vary seasonally, the way nature does it. The river would consistently have more water in it, offering fish more space to feed, reproduce and grow.

For Duke, that would mean a reduced ability to generate peaking power and the expense of buying replacement power elsewhere. To complicate matters, this region has been in a drought since 1998. For the first time in recent memory, residents, businesses and municipalities along the Catawba have been forced to deal with a water shortage.

Conservations have lauded Duke for the company's management of water to run their hydrostations while maintaining water levels to support fish habitat, fishing and boating. Lineberger said the company has been more generous with its water flows than required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the licensing agency.

"If you compare that to what we actually did during the drought, we've released a good deal more than we've had to comply with the license," said Lineberger, citing additional releases to accommodate the needs of industry and local governments that have their drinking supply and water treatment facilities along the river downstream from hydrostations.

"We've made some releases every spring to support fish spawning below the Wateree hydrostation," he said. "Even during the drought we did that."

Dick Christie, who is overseeing relicensing issues for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, sees "water allocation" -- who gets how much water and when -- as the big issue. While Christie sees Duke as being cooperative and willing to compromise, a tug-of-war between the utility and other users is inevitable.

"As they say, the devil is in the details," Christie said. "We know there is going to be more water. The real question is how much water. I'm sure we are going to want more than they want us to have."

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