



Representative McLawhorn's News from Raleigh

January 17, 2008

The Joint Select Committee on the Agricultural Drought Response met for the first time this week as my fellow legislators and I continue work to address the ongoing water shortage in our state. The committee -- formed by House Speaker Joe Hackney and Senate President Pro Tem Marc Basnight -- used the first meeting to get updated about the impact of the drought and what has been done so far to address it. The members of the committee will lead the General Assembly's response to this crisis and work closely with Gov. Mike Easley and state agencies to lessen the damage the drought has already caused in the agribusiness sector.

Ryan Boyles, the state climatologist and director of the State Climate Office at North Carolina State University, said the state would need 22 inches to 30 inches over the next six months to make a substantial drought recovery. That's at least 2 inches above normal at a time when weather patterns show there is a high likelihood of below-normal precipitation through winter and spring.

Every county in the state is suffering from drought, according to the latest information from the state's Drought Management Advisory Council. Sixty-seven counties are in exceptional drought, the highest classification; 20 are in extreme drought, and 13 are in severe drought.

30 Most Vulnerable Communities

Since the select committee met for the first time this week, I thought it would be a good time to update you on the state's drought planning and response. There is also additional information on www.ncdrought.org, the Web site for the North Carolina Drought Management Advisory Council.

Please know that all of us are working together in Raleigh to limit the harm caused by this drought and to look at ways we can do things better in the future. If you have any questions about any of this, please feel free to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Joint Select Committee on the Agricultural Drought Response

Despite all of the sobering news the committee received about the drought, there continues to be optimism.

The State Climate Office reported that ground moisture levels remain good and that if the state gets the right amount of rain in late spring, we may have better crop yields in 2008, even if the drought continues into spring.

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has several programs ready to help agriculture businesses affected by the drought. These include a toll free Hay Hotline and Hay Alert website, the Ag Partners Hay Relief Program, the Golden Hay Relief Program, and the Equine Partners Program. The Department remains concerned about farmers who need water for livestock.

North Carolina farmers and agricultural businesses have lost an estimated \$500 million because of the drought, including losses in soybeans, corn, pasture, silage, green industry, cotton, peanut, tobacco, wheat, fruits and vegetables.

Gov. Easley

Gov. Mike Easley began asking water system managers to enact conservation measures and residents to conserve last spring as the drought began in the western part of the state and moved east.

Since then, he has continued to take strong action to protect the state's water supplies. Just before Christmas, he called for public water systems to change their fee structures to encourage more conservation. He told the Drought Management Advisory Council that charging excessive water users significantly higher rates would help cut water use. He has also asked all water users to reduce consumption by at least 30 percent and for people in the hardest-hit communities to cut their use by at least 40 percent.

Just this week, the governor told water system managers from the state's 30 most vulnerable communities they need act now to make sure they will have adequate water for possibly another dry summer. He called on these communities to establish connections to other water supplies and to conduct water audits, as well as considering price changes to reduce use.

To help with this task, the governor has asked the state Department of Environment and Natural Resources to work with the threatened communities to quickly identify what money they will need to get the job done. The department will also dispatch water audit experts into each of the 30 communities to make sure undue amounts of water are not being lost to leaks and other structural problems. After identifying problems, the auditors will recommend ways to improve the systems.

League of Municipalities

Local officials met last Thursday at the North Carolina League of Municipalities to discuss possible solutions for drought related issues. There they learned that 13 water systems in the state have less than 100 days of water supply and are considered to be at a crisis level. More than 840,000 people are served by these systems. The systems are in Bessemer City, Blowing Rock, Boone, Durham, Hendersonville, Lenoir, Marshall, Monroe, Raleigh, Robbinsville, Tryon, Valdese, and Yadkinville. An additional 58 systems are at the tier two level. Although they are not currently in crisis, they could be within the next few months.

Several agencies still have money available for drought relief. These include the Rural Center, the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the Appalachian Regional Commission, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the United States Department of Agriculture. These groups are preparing a resource sheet to let communities know what funds are available and the requirements for receiving those funds.