

OUR VIEW: Alcoa permit gets input by governor

Apr 16, 2008

N.C. Gov. Mike Easley jumped in last week in the dispute over federal relicensing of Alcoa Power Generating Inc.'s properties along the Yadkin River basin, including its power generating plant on High Rock Lake in Davidson County.

But Davidson County Commissioner Max Walser, who has opposed the relicensing effort for several years, probably was correct when he doubted the governor's action would have any impact at this point in the six-year relicensing process. Alcoa's permit to operate its power plants and control reservoirs providing water to them expires April 30.

Much of the more recent opposition to renewing the permit has come from officials in Stanly County, but it seems to us that those officials haven't made a clear case for denying Alcoa nor offered a reasonable alternative if the license were denied. Those folks advocate denial because Alcoa's aluminum smelting plant at Badin in Stanly County no longer operates, providing hundreds of jobs.

These Stanly County officials contend Alcoa's permit should be denied, the state should form a public power agency and take control of the power generating plants and the waters that supply them. That way, the officials say, a private company won't have ownership of what should be the public waters of the Yadkin River.

But there's a problem here: What these Stanly County folks basically are proposing is public seizure of private property ... or either the taxpayers of North Carolina paying a lot of money to buy Alcoa's property. You see, the company not only owns its power generating plants, it also owns the lakebeds of reservoirs that supply those power plants with water. We've got to be talking hundreds of millions of dollars, at least, that the state would have to find to buy Alcoa's property - or have some kind of communistic takeover. Neither one of those options makes any sense.

In Davidson County, most of the anti-Alcoa sentiment swirls around water levels of High Rock Lake. Under the new license, Alcoa would be limited to four-foot drawdowns April through October and 10-foot drawdowns November through March. Davidson leaders wanted those drawdown levels to be three and seven, instead. Perhaps working compromises between the company and the county still can be achieved because of the important role High Rock Lake now plays in Davidson County's tourism industry and economy. But barring any damning information arising in the next couple of weeks, there seems to be little reason to deny Alcoa's relicensing.

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