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Inglis: 'Patriot Lake' not worth \$187 million effort

Backs legislator; Union supporters plan to proceed with project

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UNION - Backers of a proposed "Patriot Lake" plan to move ahead with the project despite an unfavorable report from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and lack of support from U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis.

The initial corps concept study concluded the 6,400-acre lake south of Union would cost \$187 million and was not economically justifiable. Much of the proposed lake would lie in the Sumter National Forest and involve a land swap with the National Forest Service. At a meeting Thursday in Union, Inglis, R-S.C., said he does not plan to ask Congress to approve funding to further study a project he does not consider feasible.

"It seems to me that would be poor leadership," he said. "Because leadership should mean being able to say, 'Let's sit with experts and figure out what the steps are, how big the (costs) are we've got to clear, how long the steps are we've got to run,' and then stand down here at step number one and say, 'Is that a reasonable series of steps, or is some other path more reasonable?'"

Local elected leaders and the county Lake Project committee declined to attend the session, which included members of the forest service and corps.

Committee Chairman William Jeter later said he boycotted the meeting because he believes the study inflated costs and Inglis already decided against seeking funding. He said he plans to seek support for

a \$100,000 reconnaissance study - the next step in the process - from U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint, R-S.C. Jeter, whose cousin Charles Jeter is running for Inglis' seat, also accused the corps of underestimating lake benefits and failing to consider rapid population growth when assessing the lake's potential as a water resource.

"Lakes are important to South Carolina, and they have furnished resources in the form of water, recreation and economic development for generations now," he said. "It's unfortunate (Inglis) and his staff and the corps of engineers aren't looking at the big picture in realizing the importance water is going to have in its future."

Jeter said the committee has not asked Inglis to help secure funds and plans to pursue the project as a collaborative effort among different levels of government and the private sector.

Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Torance Inman, who attended the session, said the concept study didn't reflect all potential economic development, including associated commercial development.

"I think the lake committee is looking at it from the totality of the actual project, not just water, but economic development and tourism and a multitude of other things," he said. "There's more to it than that."

The process could take more than 25 years, according to the corps. It involves forest service approval, a corps reconnaissance study, a corps feasibility study and environmental impact statement, engineering and design, congressional authorization and appropriation and construction.

The forest service's Steve Wells said converting federal land to private use would entail a land exchange with an equal value. The land must be of interest to the service and contain an equal amount of wetlands, among other factors.

The presence of any threatened or endangered species, or significant archaeological sites, could prevent a trade, Wells said, and the 15-step forest service approval process could last 10 years.

Corps Project Manager Pat O'Donnell said the agency rarely builds dams for reservoirs anymore, and then usually for navigation or flood control purposes only.

Projections show an adequate water supply for Union and five surrounding counties through 2030, he said.

"Given current laws, we don't see reason why the corps would be involved in design and construction of this reservoir," O'Donnell said.

"Therefore, we don't see that it would be likely that it would ever reach the point of being in the president's budget, or that Congress would choose to fund it beyond the president's budget."

In that case, funding would fall to state or local governments, or private parties.

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