

The South Carolina Native Plant Society noted with interest the article in the Beaufort Gazette (March 29th) about House Bill 4934 concerning regulation of isolated freshwater wetlands in South Carolina. The article correctly emphasized the important benefits isolated wetlands provide, including wildlife habitat, storm-water retention, and groundwater recharge. We believe however that the Gazette article oversimplified the current debate over the proposed bill. According to the article the main issue with H. 4934 is that regulation is limited to wetlands over 5 acres. In our opinion this issue, while of great importance, is just one of many problems with the proposed legislation. Fundamentally, what is needed is a methodology for evaluating wetland quality and protecting those wetlands, regardless of size, which provide the most important wetland functions. For example, isolated wetlands with unaltered drainage, intact native vegetation, and existing populations of rare and endangered species would be high on our protection list. Alternatively, the proverbial "farm ponds" or "drainage ditch" frequently cited by opponents of wetlands regulation would not be high candidates for protection.

H. 4934 makes no serious effort at providing standards or guidance for wetlands regulators. We urge its rejection in favor of alternative methodologies now being formulated by DHEC or, failing that, a newly introduced bill.

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