

Southern Environmental Law Center



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Derb Carter and Geoffrey Gisler study snow geese wintering in eastern North Carolina that the Southern Environmental Law Center helped protect when the Navy proposed a fighter-jet training facility nearby the wintering grounds for North America's snow geese and tundra swans.

LAW OF THE LAND, AIR, WATER, ENERGY ...

Nonprofit with Chapel Hill office tackles issues regionwide

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CHAPEL HILL — Amid growing concern over climate change and numerous other environmental issues across the country, attorneys at a nonprofit law firm in downtown Chapel Hill are lending their expertise to a collaborative effort to protect the health and environment of the Southeast.

Established in 1986, the Southern Environmental Law Center uses a combination of litigation and policy advocacy to ensure that environmental laws are followed and enforced, and pushes for stronger laws and regulations in a variety of areas. These areas include air,

ON THE WEB

Southern Environmental Law Center: <http://www.southernenvironment.org>

energy, water, forest, coast and wetlands, and transportation.

The center has 16 attorneys in the Carolinas, 12 of them working out of Chapel Hill and two out of Asheville. Seven of SELC's board members live in North Carolina, including Matthew Hapgood of Chapel Hill. There are also offices in South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and Virginia.

As a nonprofit, the SELC is funded through donations from individuals and foundations.

An annual operating budget of about \$9 million helps the center provide legal services free of charge to environmental organizations in the six states it serves.

Derb Carter, director of the offices in the Carolinas, said the proximity to UNC and a highly educated population with a passion for environmental issues have made Chapel Hill an ideal location for one of the center's largest offices, which opened in 1987.

The Chapel Hill office is currently putting most of its resources into energy and air quality work. Carter explained that if the six states served by

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the SELC were a country, they would be seventh in the world for the output of carbon dioxide. Because climate change is such a concern, the SELC wants to ensure that coal-fired power plants are as clean as possible and to find alternatives to new coal-fired plants.

"We're not just opposing coal plants, but working to encourage finding ways to move toward renewable energy sources to meet future energy needs," Carter said.

One of the center's biggest victories, Carter said, was a case that led to Duke Energy cleaning up the dirtiest of its coal-fired power plants. The SELC also opposes the utility's major new plant at Cliffside, which Carter said is unnecessary because there are alternative ways to meet demand.

Transportation is another key issue for the center, especially in the Triangle. As the area continues to grow, Carter said transit — including buses and light rail — will play a major role in "the way we grow and the way we choose to grow." With Jordan Lake under what Carter said is a "real threat from development," the center supports efforts to adopt rules that would protect the lake and appropriately manage stormwater.

The center recently filed a lawsuit against the N.C. Division of Water Quality to fight what it says would be the largest destruction of wetlands in the state's history. Some 4,000 acres of wetlands and five miles of streams along the Pamlico River are in danger after the state issued a permit for phosphate mining.

In addition to the effects of a mine on the state's commercial finfish and shellfish industries, the SELC is concerned that it would adversely affect wildlife habitats and water quality. Wetlands also serve as buffers for hurricanes and storms, which Carter said is a perfect example of how environmental issues in other parts of the state are felt everywhere.

"It's important to recognize that everything's connected in some way," Carter said. "Wetlands comprise 6 percent of the land, but store 20 percent of the carbon in the atmosphere."



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Derb Carter, director of the Carolinas offices of the Southern Environmental Law Center, says ensuring that coal-fired power plants are as clean as possible and finding alternatives to those plants are major focuses of the center. "We're not just opposing coal plants, but working to encourage finding ways to move toward renewable energy sources to meet future energy needs," Carter said. One of the center's biggest victories, Carter said, was a case that led to Duke Energy cleaning up the dirtiest of its coal-fired power plants.