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Poultry farmers say water rates hurting growth

By **Holly Hollman**
Staff Writer

ATHENS — Poultry farmers in Limestone County have ruffled feathers over water fees.

Expansion is possible here, farmers said, but to increase water meter size, they would have to pay a nearly \$30,000 impact fee.

On Thursday, farmers told the Limestone County Water and Sewer Authority Board that Tyson Foods in Tennessee is advertising for more poultry farms in this area.

Farmer Ty Smith said that when Pilgrim's Pride, a chicken processing plant, closed in Athens, poultry farmers were able to contract with Tyson. The county has 17 poultry farms, Smith said.

"Tyson has shown a long-term commitment for Limestone County," Smith said. "Tyson has a 25 percent growth base here and figures to put 15 to 20 percent more."

Four to five new poultry farms are under way, but the water fees are a deterrent. Those who started farms in 2005 got 1-inch water meters, Smith said.

He said demand is up, Tyson wants a larger broiler and with the hot summer, farmers need a 2-inch water meter. Smith said he received a letter from the authority telling him that to change to a 2-inch meter it would cost him \$4,000 for the meter and \$27,880 as an impact fee.

Smith said farmers also pay more for water usage than area water customers. Rates have increased since 2005, when farmers paid \$2.12 per 1,000 gallons. He said the price for small commercial now is \$4.66 per 1,000 gallons of water while in eastern Lauderdale County, the price is \$2.55 per 1,000 gallons.

Farmer Chad Tribble has farm property on the county line, Smith said, and is debating whether to build a poultry farm on the Limestone or Lauderdale side.

"What would you do in his case?" Smith asked the board.

If Tribble builds in Lauderdale County, Smith said, Limestone County will lose water, electric and property tax revenue.



Board Chairman Mark Yarbrough said the authority has to be fair and asked whether the board should give developers a break on fees as well. He said developers pay impact fees and install the infrastructure that helps the system grow. Developers, however, can pass those costs on to the home buyers.

Yarbrough said the authority also has \$70 million in debt it must repay, and impact fees help fund repayment.

He suggested that the poultry farmers form a consortium and seek a wholesale rate from the authority with a set minimum monthly cost.

"I would hate to be in your position, but we have to have money to get you that water," said board member Jim Moffatt, who said the county oversees 1,200 miles of pipe.

Board members agreed to further look at the issue.

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Attachments

Farmer's analysis of water fees
application/pdf, 257 KB

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