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Editorial: Santee Cooper still needs reforming, regardless of who's running the utility

- BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF
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In the year since Mark Bonsall and Charlie Duckworth arrived from Arizona to run South Carolina's 86-year-old public utility, Santee Cooper has flouted the law that barred it from lobbying against legislative plans to sell it to an investor-owned utility and infuriated legislative leaders who blamed its leaders for nearly sabotaging a state budget agreement.

It also has developed its best-ever (some would say first-ever) plan to stop squandering ratepayers' money and adapt to a rapidly evolving energy climate, and it has averted the threat of insolvency by negotiating a \$520 million settlement to refund electric customers most of what they paid in higher power bills for the abandoned construction project at the V.C. Summer nuclear station.

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[Santee Cooper extends employment contract for utility CEO and top deputy](#)

- By Andrew Brown abrown@postandcourier.com

Clearly Mr. Bonsall and Mr. Duckworth are not perfect. But they've put the utility and, more importantly, its customers in much better place than we could have

imagined a year ago. So it was reasonable and responsible for the Santee Cooper board to vote last month to give them a six-month contract extension, through July 2021.

As long as the utility is operating under the current law, these are probably the best people we could find to run it. Who knows? They might even turn out to be the best people to run it under a different law. What's important now is to remember that Santee Cooper needs to be operating under a different law.

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Yes, individuals who are no longer there, who the bad management decisions to keep spending on two nuclear reactors even after their consultants warned that nuclear partner SCE&G wasn't exercising the basic level of oversight that any rational person would expect a business to provide for the multibillion-dollar construction project.

If Santee Cooper had simply fulfilled its duty as a state agency to protect the public interest by notifying the Public Service Commission about the Bechtel report, regulators could have denied SCE&G's rate increase requests, and the two utilities might have pulled the plug much earlier or gotten the project under control.

But those individuals were enabled by state laws, which make Santee Cooper an agency that answers to no one — except maybe the Legislature, and then only if the utility's friends aren't able to block reform legislation, as they have done since forever.

[Scope: When it comes to power, the Legislature giveth, and the Legislature taketh away](#)

- BY CINDI ROSS SCOPPE

Not only is Santee Cooper exempt from PSC oversight, but the governor isn't allowed to remove the board members (who are appointed by the governor) unless he can prove that they committed a crime or refused to show up for work or met a tiny list of other firing offenses — a list that does not include squandering \$4 billion in ratepayers' money on a power plant that will never produce a watt. That means — as we discovered in the wake of the V.C. Summer fiasco — that board members feel no compulsion even to inform the governor if the state is about to experience the biggest business disaster in its history.

That has to change, particularly now that the Legislature has spent \$20 million to find that selling Santee Cooper to an investor-owned utility is not in the best interests of its customers, or of our state.

[Scope: Why South Carolina's nuclear nightmare refuses to end](#)

- By CINDI ROSS SCOPPE

Santee Cooper operates in two worlds, without the necessary constraints to ensure it operates well in either world: It's a state agency that doesn't have to answer to any political power, and it's a monopoly utility that doesn't have to answer to regulators.

The Legislature needs to make the state agency politically accountable, by allowing the governor to remove his board appointees for any reason or no reason. And it needs to make the electric monopoly accountable to its captive consumers by giving the PSC direct or indirect control over rate increases and building plans. And that's regardless of who happens to be the CEO at the moment.