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Hints of green surface in state

Despite its many natural glories, Alabama does not have a strong history of progressive environmental actions. Given that record, it is most encouraging to see the good news contained in the first *Green Gauge* report on the state's progress in 2008.

It was a year of some accomplishment in this area. The report, compiled by the nonprofit Green Resource Center for Alabama, cites four significant actions in environmental legislation and policy -- a stricter cancer risk standard for pollutants, a landfill fee increase and recycling initiative, stiffer fines for illegal hunting and fishing, and resolution of a liability issue that hampered solar energy production.

Tightening the cancer risk standard was years overdue. The stricter rules on pollutants were adopted by neighboring states long ago and reflect an appropriate emphasis on safety that clearly has not impeded economic development elsewhere.

The landfill fee, a modest \$1 per ton on waste placed in Alabama landfills, will provide funding for cleanup of the illegal dumps that dot the state, support landfill inspection programs and provide grants to expand recycling across Alabama. It's an excellent investment.

The higher fines for illegal hunting and fishing, such as hunting out of season, killing protected species and violating limits on fish and game, are well justified and should help deter these practices.

To its credit, the Legislature ended an insurance mandate that needlessly inflated the cost of solar energy. This form of power generation makes up only a tiny fraction of energy production now, but it has great potential to grow.

Green Gauge also cites several acquisitions of land for protection and actions to preserve important habitats.

It further notes an action with tremendous implications for Alabama's future -- the Legislature's resolution creating a panel to formulate a statewide water management plan. Unlike every other state in the nation, Alabama has never had such a plan. The recent drought has only underscored the importance of this.

Alabama is certainly no model of green policies -- yet -- but the trend in 2008 was definitely in the right direction. May it continue in 2009.
