State to promote lesser-known gems

Visitors will be encouraged to stop along scenic byways

By Susanne M. Schafer
Associated Press

COLUMBIA — South Carolina officials said Wednesday they want to link some of the state's lesser-known scenic areas with new visitors interested in culture, food and fitness as a way to expand the state's $15 billion tourist industry.

Lawmakers, state officials, researchers from the University of South Carolina and supporters from Duke Energy launched their initiative Wednesday at the Statehouse in Columbia.

"We want to showcase parts of the state that tend to be forgotten," said Eddie Adams, Department of Transportation commissioner. "It's time we focus on some of the beautiful stretches of roads, the communities that people may not see, because they are a bit away from the interstate."

Much attention and advertising is directed to such well-known tourist destinations as Charleston, Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head. Officials said the new effort might also promote visits to local farms, hiking along the Savannah River or drives under age-old live oaks on Edisto Island.

To help get the effort moving, officials from Duke Energy announced they had provided $50,000 to support a USC study on tourism and its potential for economic development along four of the state's so-called "scenic byways."

USC researcher Rich Harrill, acting director of the School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism Management, said his study will look at regions that run through the far northwestern hills in the Upstate and south along the Savannah River basin and through the Lowcountry to the coast.

Harrill said the roads could be a magnet for new visitors to the state, but research will have to determine exactly what that might mean. He said in an interview the goal is to highlight "our food, our culture, the nature" that can be found in those regions.

Agricultural Commissioner Hugh Weathers said some of the outcomes could range from improved road signs that would direct people to certain sites to advertising highlighting certain roads, farms, educational sites or restaurants.