

THE VALUE OF RIVER BASIN MANAGEMENT PLANNING FOR GEORGIA

Mike Wardrip

AUTHOR: Water Issues Chair, Sierra Club, P.O. Box 1670, Lilburn, Georgia 30226.

REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 1993 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held April 20 and 21, 1993, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, Editor, Institute of Natural Resources, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, the Georgia General Assembly passed the River Basin Management Planning Act (SB 637). This act calls for the establishment of river basin management plans for all major river basins in Georgia. The first river systems for which work is beginning to establish management plans are the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers. In 1994 planning activities are slated to begin in the Oconee basin. One by one, each river basin in Georgia will come under the planning process until studies are underway or completed for all basins. Under the law, five years is allowed for the establishment of management plans, so as many as five plans may be in development in any year.

The concept of managing a river basin as a unit is not terribly new, but it has never before been articulated in Georgia law. Past efforts at river basin protection have come under the Metropolitan River Protection Act, the State Planning Act (minimum environmental standards under Growth Strategies regulations and the River Corridor Protection Act). A question that is often asked is: "With these measures in place along with the provisions of the federal Clean Water Act and the Georgia Water Quality Control Act, why is there a need for this program?". The answer is, that there is, in fact, an array of measures on the books designed in some way to address river planning or protection, but each of these measures are specific in their geographic focus or are piecemeal efforts at controlling land use without an overall strategy for management of our valuable water resources. River Basin Planning carried out under SB 637 is intended to provide a publicly accessible framework for making management decisions and to develop policies which are specific to each river basin. An opportunity exists for the river planning process to be a public forum for determining the most effective means to carry out all the other directives and planning requirements already listed.

One other important factor in the establishment of the rationale for SB 637 is the concern over proper implementation. Georgia EPD is a regulatory agency with clear existing legal authority and responsibility for carrying out policies where the goal is protecting the quality of our waters. A clear example is EPD's NPDES delegation authority. Senate Bill 637 states that once a river basin

management plan is in place, permitting and other activities carried out by Georgia DNR will be consistent with the plan. In the case of Growth Strategies, which is the program where the most comparisons are made, there is no force of law unless local ordinances are established pursuant to minimum standards. No aspersion is cast on Growth Strategies. It is a very valuable program, but it is not duplicated by Senate Bill 637 in its intent. Using other states which have begun river basin planning efforts as an example; in South Carolina and North Carolina, documents outlining their programs repeatedly cite specific planning and reporting requirements under the federal Clean Water Act as a major part of the rationale for developing river basin or watershed management plans. Georgia does not necessarily need to copy the actions of other states where these types of programs are in place, but they do provide good examples of programs Georgia can learn from.

The challenge of developing a planning strategy for river basins in Georgia is complicated by a range of issues and interests. Few have disagreed with the premise that planning efforts under SB 637 are a valuable asset for Georgia. However, strained budgets and limited resources put a crimp in our ability to carry out the objectives of this act. For FY 1994, EPD requested twenty new water quality positions, with two of these positions earmarked for implementation of SB 637. When the Governor's version of the budget came out, none of these positions were included. As of this writing, the General Assembly is in recess with budget talks underway. This writer's fond wish is to be able to announce at the Water Resources Conference, that these positions have been filled.

Action under SB 637 is complemented by the Comprehensive Studies of the ACF and ACT River Basins in which the states of Georgia, Alabama and Florida are seeking to decide on a strategy for allocation of water resources in these river basins. Although a Citizens Advisory Committee has already been established for the Chattahoochee and Flint River Basins, implementation of SB 637 is in somewhat of a holding pattern pending release of final scopes of work from the ACF-ACT Comprehensive Studies. One major concern is that the ACF-ACT study is a safety valve out of a lawsuit wherein the major bone of contention is water supply, not water

quality. In addition, interstate posturing and politics will no doubt exert considerable influence on the planning process in the ACF-ACT studies. Over-reliance on a study like ACF-ACT to lay the groundwork for SB 637 implementation may cause the management plan developed for the Chattahoochee-Flint and Coosa River Basins to look like an adjunct to the ACF-ACT Comprehensive Studies. The language in SB 637 was not intended to simply generate a water allocation study. Rather, it was intended as a framework in which a wide range of activities in each river basin can be examined and managed for the benefit of improved water quality AND water supply. Some of EPD's own writings on SB 637 implementation reveal a vision that includes examination of a broad range of activities in river basins which may become components in river management plans.

By December 31, 1993, the process of management plan development for the Coosa and Oconee is required to be underway. The Oconee will be the first river basin outside the ACF-ACT Comprehensive Studies to come under the requirements of SB 637. In the case of the Oconee basin, and all future management plans, no reliance can be placed on another study to lay any groundwork for the planning process. South Carolina is beginning its river basin management planning process in the Savannah basin. Georgia is not, at this time, contemplating a joint effort with South Carolina on management plan development. South Carolina will be updating its management plans on a regular basis (every five years?). EPD officials have hinted that Georgia may wait to deal with the planning process in the Savannah basin until such time as South Carolina is modifying its plan.

Further review of possible benefits from river basin planning follows. Development of river basin management plans:

- * Provides a method to focus limited resources in a holistic approach to long term management decisions affecting economic and environmental resources, improving effectiveness and consistency in management decisions;
- * Provides a method to identify priority problem areas and pollution sources that merit particular control and enforcement efforts;
- * Facilitates implementation of innovative management approaches to protect the state's surface water quality;
- * Allows for sound economic growth and planning;
- * Encourages equitable distribution of assimilative capacity, if basinwide total daily maximum load standards are established;
- * Provides for increased assessment, through monitoring and modelling, of the interactions among pollutants and pollutant sources, from a basin's headwaters to the river's mouth;
- * Helps fulfill the requirements of the federal Clean Water Act and the Georgia Water Quality Control Act in the most effective and efficient manner, by consolidating survey and reporting activities into an integrated manage-

ment plan;

- * Provides credible evidence of Georgia's desire to protect and manage river basins to federal authorities and those states with whom we share water resources.