

WATER STEWARDS: ADDRESSING THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURAL WATER USE IN GEORGIA

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BACKGROUND

Agriculturalists have for generations sought to control every variable of the production equation. One by one, agricultural scientists have harnessed the fields of genetics, agronomy, engineering, botany, and dozens more, thus allowing consumers worldwide to enjoy the literal "fruits" of these discoveries. The correlation between optimal plant and animal health and a suitable supply of water had to be one of the first, and perhaps most simple, scientific findings by early generations. Though many of man's tools have changed, access to and utilization of water in modern agriculture often remains the single most important issue that separates productivity and mediocrity, profit and loss.

Georgians believe in the wealth producing power of water, evidenced by the plethora of land based industries that draw life from a seemingly endless supply of hydrological resources and consumer demand.

In the spring of 1996, circumstances began to change. Previously, the seriousness of water use restrictions were gauged only by the tint of lawn colors and "please wash me" outlines on automobiles. Many a heart skipped a beat in the spring of 1996, when regulators unveiled plans for a moratorium on deep well permits in the Upper Floridan Aquifer. Salt water intrusion became an agricultural household dinner table topic. How would agriculture survive? Were the threats real? How should the agricultural community respond?

FORMATION OF WATER STEWARDS

Agribusiness and commodity leaders sensed the need to convene all agricultural interest groups to assess the situation, vent frustrations and attempt to develop a vehicle for addressing water issues across commodity and business sector lines. On May 14, 1996, 56 leaders met in Macon, Georgia, and collectively began to realize that salt water intrusion was just one of the water related issues facing the food and fiber industry. During the meeting the subjects of turbidity and "total maximum daily loads" jockeyed for position as the next threats to the future of agriculture. By days end, all present agreed that an official coalition would foster cooperation and focus resources - two very critical elements of a successful campaign. *WaterStewards* breathed its first breath.

The Macon group charged representatives of the Georgia Forestry Association, Georgia Cattlemens Association, Georgia Farm Bureau, Georgia Poultry Federation, University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and Georgia

Agribusiness Council with the task of developing a strategy for the new coalition. This "steering committee" developed the following mission statement and list of objectives:

Mission Statement: To serve as a clearinghouse for information on Water Stewardship for Georgia's agricultural community.

Objectives: (1) To define and develop solutions to agricultural water stewardship issues, (2) inform policy makers and the general public about agricultural water stewardship issues, initiatives, accomplishments, and benefits, (3) To promote the valuable relationship between agricultural water stewardship and the quality of life for Georgians.

To meet the immediate challenges presented by the Interim Management Plan for the Upper Floridan, namely the permit moratorium, steering committee members organized a leadership team for a southeast Georgia working group comprised of members of their respective organizations who reside in the coastal region. Representatives of most other agricultural organizations in the region also serve on the working group.

Current and proposed activities of WaterStewards

Coalition leaders have been active in the following issues since the formation of *WaterStewards*:

(1) Teaming up with a wide range of interest groups in the 24 county region in southeast Georgia affected by the 1996 permit moratorium, *WaterStewards* contributed to the effort which resulted in the postponement of the restrictions. Members have participated in a host of meetings with officials from the Environmental Protection Division during the development and comment process for the revised Interim Management Plan.

(2) *WaterStewards* has publicly supported the development of a narrative turbidity standard for Georgia waterways.

(3) The Southeast Georgia Working Group is currently proposing a public/private partnership to monitor a statistically sound number of agricultural wells in the region beginning in spring of 1997.

(4) Four *WaterStewards* organizational representatives will serve on the Joint Coastal Groundwater Study Committee created during the 1997 Session of the Georgia General Assembly.

Leadership and unity are essential elements of any successful cause. *WaterStewards* is poised to provide leadership within the agribusiness industry to address water use issues well into the next millennium. Agricultural leaders recognize that through *WaterStewards* understanding and unity of purpose must be achieved in order for the food and fiber industry to have a solid footing in the arena of water issue debate.