

AGRICULTURAL WATER ISSUES FACING THE GREEN INDUSTRY

William I. Segars

AUTHOR: Extension Water Quality Coordinator, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, 324 Hoke Smith Building, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602.

REFERENCE: Proceedings of the 1997 Georgia Water Resources Conference, held March 20-22, 1997, at The University of Georgia, Kathryn J. Hatcher, editor, Institute of Ecology, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-2202.

Abstract. Water used by agriculture for crop and livestock production and the Green Industry accounts for approximately one-third of the state's consumptive usage. The profitable expansion of Georgia's largest industry depends on adequate water supplies. Because of previous legislative exemptions, the agricultural community has not been required to document total water consumption. Water management strategies for future use cannot be effective unless these data are available. Additionally, most agricultural operations have been exempted from certain water quality standards such as the Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act. This discussion will address the most recently legislative and regulatory actions that affect the agricultural community.

DISCUSSION

Because of the constantly changing legislative and regulatory actions affecting water quality and quantity in agriculture, it is not possible to accurately explain their impact several months in advance of the conference. (This article was written in November 1996.) The author will outline the most recent developments and explain their impacts on the Green Industry at the conference.

Topics to be addressed, with explanation of economic and environmental impacts, include the following:

- a) amendments to the GA Water Quality Control Act (House Bill 1788) that required establishment of turbidity standards for streams and water bodies;
- b) status of salt-water intrusion in Southeast Georgia;
- c) development of alternative water uses to reduce groundwater withdrawal from confined aquifers;
- d) development of a voluntary procedure to document agricultural water use;
- e) progress in the requirements to establish total maximum

daily loads (TMDL's) for certain designated stream segments;

- f) impacts of the environmental components of the 1996 Farm Bill;
- g) status of the Federally-Mandated Coastal Zone Management Act;
- h) a contrast of voluntary versus regulatory programs to protect water quality.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dawning of a new era in water management is reaching the entire agricultural industry. Hopefully, improved management programs will be the result of voluntary participation rather than forced management from regulatory officials. It behooves the agricultural water users to study and learn improved water conservation methods to reduce consumption, and to implement best management practices (BMP's) to protect water quality. All water users must recognize that it will take a united effort to effectively elicit change in water use ethics. Educational programs must be expanded to create an even greater concern for environmental stewardship.