

# AN INTERSTATE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE SUWANNEE RIVER BASIN

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## INTRODUCTION

Mere geographic proximity or the sharing of a common water resource has not overcome the many economic and political differences that can exist between states. However, the voluntary resource management program being used by Florida and Georgia agencies in the Suwannee Basin is an important step toward coordinated, rather than ad hoc, cooperation.

The Suwannee Basin Interagency Alliance (SBIA) is an organization of state, federal, and local agencies working to promote interstate watershed management within the 10,000 square mile Suwannee River Basin. The basin is shared by Georgia (57 percent) and Florida (43 percent).

Originating in the Okefenokee Swamp, the Suwannee River flows 235 miles to the Gulf of Mexico. Major tributaries are the Withlacoochee, Alapaha, and Santa Fe Rivers (Figure 1).

## Organizational Background of the SBIA

In 1992, Georgia adopted a river basin management planning approach to watershed protection as defined in State law (O.C.G.A. 12-5-520) passed by the Georgia General Assembly. The law provided for a plan to be developed for each major river basin of the state, including the Suwannee River Basin. The Georgia Dept. of Natural Resources, Environmental Protection Division (GAEPD), is charged with development of the plans.

In Florida, five regional water management districts, with boundaries based on river basins, were created with the passage of the Water Resources Act in 1972 (Chapter 373, Florida Statutes). The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) is one of these five Florida water management districts. In 1991 the SRWMD adopted the Suwannee River Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) Plan as directed by the Florida legislature. In 1994 the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) named the Suwannee as one of six ecosystem "pilot" areas in Florida and, in cooperation with the SRWMD, produced a Suwannee River Ecosystem Management Plan.

These laws and programs, all of which promote an integrated, holistic watershed protection approach to water management, led to the formation of the SBIA, which held its first formal meeting on September 20, 1995, in Cordele, Georgia.

## A COOPERATIVE INTERSTATE EFFORT

The management challenge in the Suwannee Basin is to bring together the resources of two states to promote the management of water resources. Some states have entered into formal agreements or compacts to accomplish this. Examples of this approach include the Chesapeake Bay and the Delaware River (EPA, 1995; Delaware River Basin Commission, 1994).

In the Suwannee River Basin, agencies are using a voluntary approach to coordinate management activities. Although the SBIA has no formal charter or compact, Florida and Georgia, by cooperating now, are seeking to avoid water quality and quantity problems within the basin.

The need for such a cooperative program was documented over 30 years ago by a federal study commission which found that, "the problems of the [Suwannee] basin communities are not all alike, but they are of common interest. There is now no common forum for analyzing...problems and for deciding upon a unified program. Such a forum is needed." (United States Study Commission, 1963). The SBIA is now providing that forum.

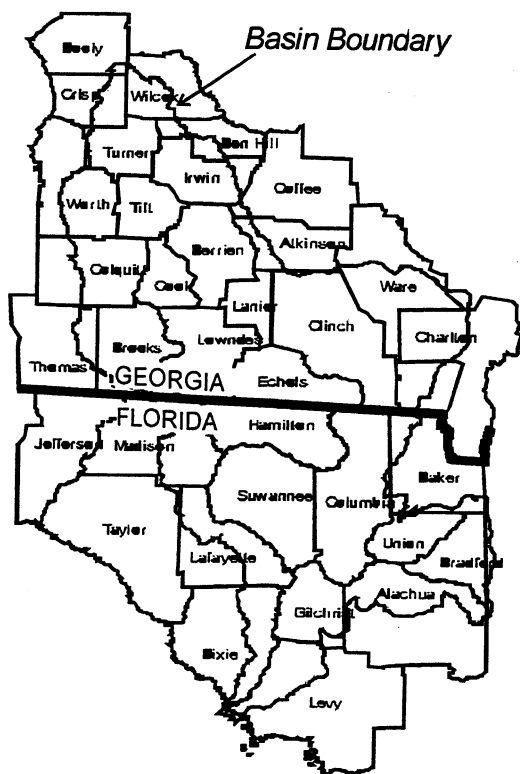


Figure 1. Broad River watershed area.

### **SBIA Goals and Operating Framework**

The primary goals of the SBIA are:

- To develop an interstate management plan based upon the principle of voluntary cooperation among agencies within the Suwannee River basin;
- To improve communication and coordination among agencies and the public;
- To promote more efficient use of funds and human resources through interagency cooperation.

The SBIA is co-chaired by representatives of the GAEPD and the SRWMD. An executive committee made up of the GAEPD, the SRWMD, FDEP, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS) work together to establish meeting schedules, meeting agendas, and to produce a biannual newsletter. Other participants in the alliance include most of the regional, state, and federal agencies within the basin with natural resource management responsibilities.

The SBIA meets at least twice a year (October and April) and alternates its meetings between Florida and Georgia.

The voluntary participation of agencies is the key feature of the SBIA. The SBIA operates on the basis of consensus among participants. Each agency acts within the context of its own authority and responsibilities. The representatives from the various agencies are developing working relationships and are becoming familiar with management issues within the basin. The issues are highlighted primarily through presentations by the various agencies. Discussions have included proposed mining near the Okefenokee Swamp, sturgeon research in the Suwannee River, and the establishment of minimum flows and levels for the lower Suwannee River.

### **Coordination of Water Quality Monitoring**

A major short-term cooperative effort between Florida and Georgia will be the coordination of surface water quality monitoring. An extensive water quality monitoring program has been in place in the Florida portion of the basin since 1989. Georgia will begin intensive water quality monitoring in the basin in 1998. Each state will sample a set of common parameters and will coordinate the sampling schedule. Data will be entered into STORET, a national water quality data base. A cooperative report will present the results of the monitoring program.

### **AN INTERSTATE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

The need for an interstate management plan is based upon the simple fact that natural resources do not conform to political boundaries. Both states can achieve better resource management through closer communication and voluntary coordination of ongoing planning and management programs.

### **Georgia Planning Program**

The Georgia program will address surface and groundwater quantity and quality issues. This comprehensive approach is the cornerstone of the River Basin Management Plan. The planning process for the Suwannee River Basin will be initiated in 1997 and will be completed in 2001. Updates will be completed every

five years thereafter.

Each plan will include a description of the basin or watershed, identification of local governments, land use inventories, and a description of goals that may include providing environmental education, improvement of water quality, reduction of pollution at the source, improvement of aquatic habitat, re-establishment of native fish, restoration and protection of wildlife habitat and provision of recreational benefits. Implementation strategies will be included in the plan.

A seven person local advisory committee will assist the GAEPD during plan development. In addition, stakeholder involvement is emphasized. Stakeholder meetings will be held to facilitate public input at key stages of the process, although stakeholder involvement is considered to be a continuous process, not limited to scheduled meetings.

Creating and supporting governmental partnerships will be a guiding principle of the planning program in the Suwannee Basin.

### **Florida Planning Program**

On a parallel track with the Georgia Planning program will be the revision of the SRWMD Suwannee River System SWIM Plan adopted in 1991 and the FDEP/SRWMD Suwannee River Ecosystem Management Plan completed in 1994. Both plans include a listing of issues and strategies for protecting the Suwannee River System. Both plans call for improved coordination with agencies working in Georgia. Public participation will be encouraged through the continuation of annual town meetings held in each county. The revision of these plans will be closely coordinated with the Georgia planning program to make sure that common issues and strategies are identified.

Planning documents, data, and direct staff input from agencies such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the USF&WS and other natural resource management agencies will be used in the planning process.

### **Interstate Plan Format**

The interstate management plan will not replace the programs or supersede the formal planning documents that are adopted by each state. However, as Georgia creates a management plan for the upper portion of the Suwannee Basin, the SRWMD and the FDEP will have the opportunity to revise their management plans to reflect common issues and strategies. The format for the interstate basin plan has not been finalized, but it will (1) synthesize the various issues, policies and management strategies for the basin, and (2) describe the voluntary efforts of the states to coordinate management strategies.

### **LITERATURE CITED**

- United States Study Commission, Southeast River Basins, Suwannee Basin, Plan for Development of the Land and Water Resources of the Southeast River Basins, Appendix 5, 1963, 1-22.
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