

PERSPECTIVES ON THE STATEWIDE WATER PLAN

Kristin Rowles¹ and Julie Mayfield²

AUTHORS: Senior Policy Analyst¹, Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center, P.O. Box 345, Albany, GA 31702 and Vice President & General Counsel², Georgia Conservancy, 817 West Peachtree Street, Suite 200, Atlanta, GA 30308

REFERENCE: *Proceedings of the 2007 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held March 27–29, 2007, at the University of Georgia.

In 2004, the Georgia Legislature created a new state-wide water resources planning process through adoption of the Comprehensive State-wide Water Management Planning Act. The Act mandates the development of a state-wide water plan to guide the management of Georgia's water resources. The Act sets the broad and far-reaching goal that "Georgia manage water resources in a sustainable manner to support the state's economy, to protect public health and natural systems, and to enhance the quality of life for all citizens" (O.C.G.A. 12-5-522(a)).

The Act created the Georgia Water Council to coordinate the planning process. The Council includes fourteen members who represent a range of decision-makers on water issues in Georgia. The Council membership consists of:

- Eight state officials (ex officio) representing agencies involved in water resources management including the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Community Assistance, the Department of Agriculture, and the Soil and Water Conservation Commission;
- Four state legislators including the chairs of the Senate Natural Resources and Environment Committee and the House Natural Resources and Environment Committee;
- One citizen appointed by the Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives;
- One citizen appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate

The director of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) serves as the chairperson of the Water Council.

The roles of the Water Council are to: (1) ensure coordination, cooperation and communication among state agencies and their water-related efforts in the development of a comprehensive statewide water management plan, (2) provide input to the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources concerning development of the plan, (3) review, modify if necessary, and approve the final draft of the proposed plan, and (4) recommend such proposed plan for consideration by the General Assembly.

The EPD is charged with developing the plan for consideration by the Water Council no later than July 1, 2007. For the past two years, the EPD has been engaged in the process of developing the plan through a process involving numerous stakeholder committees. The EPD's efforts have been organized according to four management objectives:

- Minimize withdrawals of water by increasing conservation, reuse, and efficiency;
- Maximize returns to river basins by managing inter-basin transfers and uses of on-site sewage disposal systems, and land application of treated wastewater where water quantity is limited;
- Meet in-stream and off-stream needs for water through surface storage, aquifer management and reducing water demands; and
- Protect water quality by reducing discharges of pollutants to streams and runoff from land, so as not to exceed the assimilative capacity of the streams.

In addition to these objectives, the EPD plans to include some guidance on applying the plan at the sub-state level, but the initial plan will not include region-specific water management strategies. Instead, the initial plan will focus on building a policy framework for water resources management in the state. The planning process will not end with the initial plan, and subsequent editions of the plan will allow water resource managers to dig more deeply into important water resources issues.

As the EPD works toward preparing its plan for the Water Council, stakeholders are voicing their views on the plan in a number of ways, but most especially at the Water Council's Town Hall meetings. To date, two series of Town Hall meetings have been held around the state to collect stakeholder input on the developing plan and the planning process. Another round of Town Hall meetings will be held in May 2007.

A major feature of the current plan is the use of "consumptive use budgets" to manage water quantity in the state. For water quality, the plan seeks to improve monitoring, plan for wastewater permits on a basin-wide and long-term basis, and consider the use of pollutant allocation trading. Stakeholders have filed a range of supporting and dissenting comments on these ideas, and the plan is

still evolving to address concerns and meet its ambitious objectives.

Because of the great importance of water to our state's economy and our natural systems, the plan will be of utmost important to our future. While we note that the plan is still in development, the Georgia Water Resources Conference comes at a time when the plan is a prominent water issue for this state. Therefore, the conference will include a panel of stakeholders who will present their perspectives on the current plan and the planning process. The panel members include:

- Gil Rogers, Staff Attorney, Southern Environmental Law Center
- Billy Sanders, Farmer, Dooly County
- Kevin Green, Vice President of Environmental Affairs, Metropolitan Atlanta Chamber of Commerce
- Tony Rojas, Executive Director, Macon Water Authority
- Bob Scanlon, Environmental Affairs Officer, City of Savannah

The panel will be moderated by Rick Brownlow of the Atlanta Regional Commission.

The panel will provide these stakeholders with the opportunity to make detailed comments on the plan, but it will also provide for discussion among the stakeholders. Interaction and discussion are critical to this process. The panelists will be asked to respond to questions such as:

- (1) What is the most important water resources issue facing Georgia?
- (2) How will this plan improve the state's efforts to manage water resources?
- (3) What problems will we encounter in implementing the plan?
- (4) Will all stakeholders feel that their voices were heard and the plan is fair?
- (5) Are voluntary and educational measures adequate to address our current issues or will new regulatory programs be necessary?

The statewide water planning process presents Georgians the opportunity to comprehensively evaluate and adjust our water management strategies to ensure that we will use and protect our water resources wisely and ensure that they will provide for our future use, health, and enjoyment. Because it is a topic with such far-reaching consequences, it touches stakeholders from all walks of life and all reaches of our state. This panel is one opportunity to promote the informed discussion that will be needed to provide for an effective and broadly-supported plan.