

IMPROVING COLLABORATION, COORDINATION, AND COMMUNICATION ON A REGIONAL LEVEL

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WATER RESOURCES PLANNING

Over the years, many county, state, and federal agencies, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), developed a reputation for planning water resource projects without soliciting input from “other interested resource agencies”. This often results in project delays and additional expenses due to untimely responses, misinterpretations, and agency disagreements.

Rapid development of the metro-Atlanta area has resulted in widespread detrimental impacts to the water resources of the region and increased nonpoint source pollution has contributed to habitat loss/alteration, flow regime modification, and changes in the trophic base of the stream biota. The logistical and political tribulations of the efforts required to restore these aquatic ecosystems has resulted in local sponsors requesting aid from the Corps. Due to the large number of ecosystem restoration projects located in the Metropolitan North Georgia region, the Mobile – Savannah Planning Center recognized the need to form a central interdisciplinary team, the North Georgia Watershed Team (NGWT) to manage and support the decision making process for ecosystem restoration projects located in the North Georgia region. The immediate challenge facing this team was to identify and include all stakeholders in the process of formulating acceptable solutions for the numerous General Investigation Studies and Continuing Authority Projects in this large urbanized region of Georgia.

In an effort to improve collaboration, coordination, and communication between the stakeholders, the NGWT organized an interagency working group, the North Georgia Water Resource Agencies (NGWRA). The NGWRA consists of approximately 30 members with representatives from the Corps, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR) Wildlife Resources Division (WRD), and GADNR Environmental Protection Division (EPD), and local sponsors and stakeholders. The attendance of project sponsors is critical as they bring special focus to local considerations before the entire working group.

The NGWRA held a series of five workshops that focused on defining restoration goals, understanding agency

roles and responsibilities, and sharing data and analysis tools. The interagency working group has been very successful in collaboratively developing a regional ecosystem response model for aquatic ecosystem restoration projects. The model is in the process of being certified for use during the feasibility phase of Corps’ projects in the North Georgia Region and could potentially serve as a template for measuring ecosystem restoration project outputs in other parts of the country as well. The interagency group has also identified additional analysis tools that could be developed or adapted from other areas, such as regional hydrographs, less subjective habitat assessments, and monitoring programs that facilitate adaptive management. Additional workshops are planned to occur quarterly (as funding allows) to assure timely information exchange and the formulation of truly acceptable and executable watershed level solutions.