

Revised Draft Comprehensive Statewide Water Management Plan

SECTION 1: PURPOSE

Background

Georgia's current approach to water management has evolved in a piecemeal fashion over several decades, mainly through reactions to federal legislative mandates and localized and immediate water issues such as droughts. However, as the population and economy of the state grow and the demands on water resources increase, a comprehensive approach to water management will be necessary.

The purpose of this plan, as stated by O.C.G.A. §12-5-522(a), is to guide Georgia in managing 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. The plan lays out statewide policies, management practices, and guidance for regional planning. The provisions of this plan are intended to guide river basin and aquifer management plans and regional water planning efforts statewide in a manner consistent with O.C.G.A. §§12-5-522 and 12-5-570 et seq.

The plan employs concepts which are innovative for Georgia. The first is the use of thorough evaluation of resources, called Water Resource Assessments. We cannot effectively plan for and manage what we do not measure. Selecting the optimum water management strategies requires precise information about the capacities of Georgia's water resources. EPD must determine how much water can be consumed from the state's major rivers, lakes, or aquifers without causing unacceptable negative impacts; this amount of water is also called the consumptive use assessment. EPD also must determine the assimilative capacity, which is the amount of wastewater and stormwater streams can assimilate before water quality begins to degrade. EPD will begin the process of assessment by identifying the hydrologic boundaries of watersheds and aquifers to be used for assessment purposes. EPD will analyze existing information, and when that information is not sufficient, undertake enhanced monitoring.

The second new concept is the development of regional forecasts of water supply and assimilative capacity demands. These forecasts will be developed for planning regions that will be designed to reflect jurisdictional boundaries and economic interdependencies as well as hydrologic boundaries. Regional forecasts will be compared with the water resource assessments for each planning region so that areas that may face water challenges in the future can be identified. A package of management practices, tailored to local needs and resource conditions, can then be selected to meet those challenges.

The third concept is the regional water development and conservation plans. These plans, which will be developed for all of the planning regions, will describe the water management practices to be employed in each area. Since water resources, their conditions, and their uses vary greatly across the state, selection and implementation of management practices on a regional and local level is the most effective way to ensure that current and future needs for water supply and assimilative capacity are met.

The management practices specified in the water development and conservation plans for each region will be supported by statewide guidance.

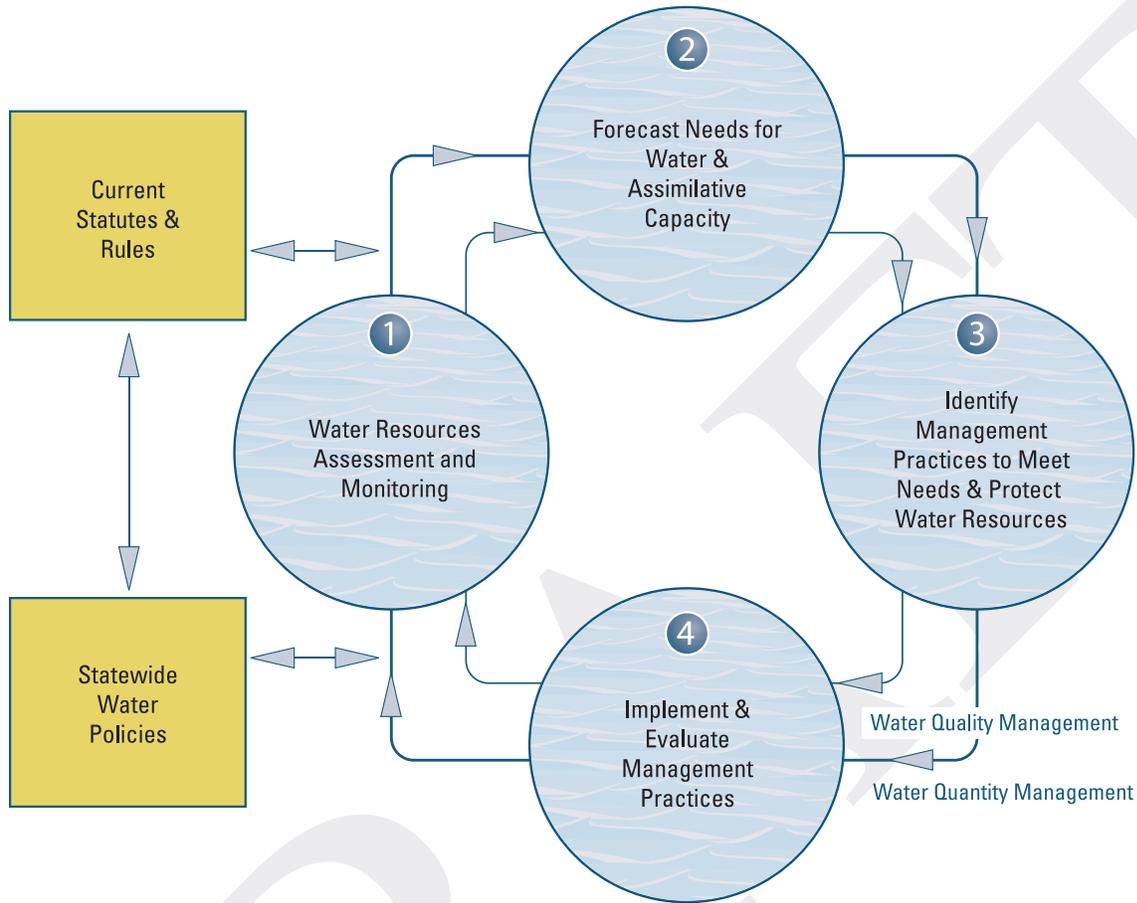
All three of these water management concepts are supported by and consistent with current Georgia law. State law provides the foundation for development and implementation of a comprehensive statewide water management plan, and this plan is designed to be consistent with Georgia's current statutes. Most fundamentally, the regulated riparian legal doctrine as described by Georgia case law from its appellate courts and the O.C.G.A., including and provisions regarding reasonable use will continue to guide water management in Georgia.

Other provisions of our management systems will remain in place. For example, this plan will not affect current provisions in state law that provides the Director the authority, during an emergency period of water shortage, to impose restrictions on water use beyond those that might be identified in this plan or subsequent regional water development and conservation plans. Additionally, this plan will not affect provisions in current law that set up a system of water use priorities during emergency periods of water shortage; which includes the provision "...first priority to providing water for human consumption and second priority for farm use." Similarly, the plan will not change or replace current statutory provisions for permitting of water withdrawals (including provisions therein recognizing the economic consequences and preference for an existing water user) and wastewater discharges, or replace the rules promulgated under those statutes. It also will not compel interbasin or intrabasin transfers, or favor one area of the state over another.

The plan builds upon Georgia's current statutory framework to create a more integrated water management policy consistent with the vision and guiding principles presented in the chapter introducing statewide water planning. The following figure depicts the overall approach to integrated water management laid out in this plan. The process is a cycle, rather than a one-time plan. Based on current state laws and policies, the cycle has four major steps that will be addressed in regional planning conducted following the provisions of this plan:

1. The cycle begins with completion of a set of water resource assessments by EPD. These assessments will define the capabilities of Georgia's water resources in terms of water supply and capacity to assimilate pollution.
2. A regional water planning council will then be responsible for using regional population and employment estimates to forecast needs for water and assimilative capacity within a water planning region.

Georgia Comprehensive Statewide Water Management Plan



3. A regional water development and conservation plan will be prepared by EPD and by regional water planning councils, as described in Section 14. The plan will identify the management practices to be employed to ensure that the forecasted regional water and wastewater needs can be met without exceeding the water quantity and water quality capacities identified in the resource assessments. In some situations, the regional water plan may identify management practices that will supplement the resource capacities in a manner that conforms to policies and criteria presented in this plan. The regional water management plans will be reviewed by the EPD, and if they are consistent with established guidance, adopted by EPD.

4. Once adopted, the plans would be implemented by the water users in the water planning region and EPD will make water permitting decisions based on the plans.

EPD, in cooperation with federal agencies, local governments, and other partners, will continue to monitor water resources to maintain and update information on the status and condition of the state's waters. This information will support future revisions in resource assessments and management practices.

This plan is intended to guide long-term planning for Georgia's water resources and is not intended to address responses to extreme conditions, like drought, or emergency circumstances that may result. It will be implemented in conjunction with the State Drought Management Plan, the Flint River Drought Protection Act, and other statutes and regulations that guide responses to drought or other emergency circumstances.

This plan lays out the basic framework for the management cycle depicted in the figure above. It has four major components:

- Integrated water policies that will govern water management decisions in the state;
- Provisions for assessment of the capacities of the state's water resources;
- A "toolbox" of water quantity and water quality management practices; and
- Provisions for regional planning to select the management practices that best fit the resource conditions and uses in different regions throughout the state.

The sections that follow describe each of these components in greater detail. A portion of the actions required to implement this plan can be taken by EPD within its current statutory authority and administrative procedures specified in the rules and regulations promulgated to date by the Board of Natural Resources. Other actions will require amendment of the rules and regulations promulgated by Board of Natural Resources. Each section generally contains a statement of policies followed by specific implementation steps.

Guiding Policies

- (1) In order to support the state's economy, protect public health and natural systems, and enhance citizens' quality of life, Georgia must protect the ability of the state's water resources to meet all reasonable current and future water needs of the state. These needs include the offstream and instream uses that sustain the state's cities, counties, rural communities, farms, businesses, industries, and the environment.
- (2) Georgia's surface waters have assimilative and water supply capacities that govern their use for instream and offstream purposes. Georgia's groundwaters have similar capacities that govern their use. Exceeding these capacities, or supplementing them in ways that foreclose opportunities for other users and uses, may have detrimental effects on current and future users and on the health and well-being of Georgians and natural systems.
- (3) Water uses, wastewater discharges, runoff and various management practices in one water source may affect the assimilative and water supply capacities of hydrologically connected water sources.
- (4) "Water use" refers to the particular purposes or end uses for which water is employed in Georgia, whether instream, offstream or pumped from an aquifer. Water use includes human consumption, irrigation and other farm uses, industrial and commercial production, wastewater assimilation, recreation, hydropower, habitat maintenance and species protection, among others. "Water users" refers to those within Georgia using the water such as water utilities, homeowners, farmers, industries, and commercial businesses. Georgia's water resources will be managed to support water uses related to both human needs and natural systems.
- (5) Water quality and quantity and surface and groundwater are interrelated and require integrated planning as well as reasonable and efficient use.
- (6) Water resources management must have a sound scientific foundation and recognize that economic prosperity and environmental quality are interdependent.
- (7) Improving the information base for water management is critical to supporting current and future human use of water and the needs of natural systems. While the information base is being improved, management decisions must be based on the best information available at the time and on the laws, rules, plans, and administrative procedures in place at the time. Water use and management, including decisions regarding water permits, will proceed under these terms as resource assessments are conducted and regional water plans are developed.
- (8) This water plan and subsequent regional Water Development and Conservation Plans will be implemented in coordination with current and future state plans, such as the State Energy Strategy, that may affect water resources.
- (9) Georgia will work within existing mechanisms, and will seek to develop new mechanisms, to foster effective interstate management of the water resources shared with its state neighbors to the north, south, east, and west.