

SECTION 3: INTEGRATED WATER POLICY

Background

Throughout Georgia's history, the state's **water resources** have been used for a wide variety of **offstream** purposes. Rivers and streams have also served as receptacles for wastewater. While these two types of **water use** are interrelated, the state has not consistently regulated water withdrawals and wastewater discharges in an integrated fashion. Historically, regulatory decisions on the capability of sources to support water withdrawals have not always considered how those withdrawals may directly and indirectly affect water quality. Likewise, when making decisions about wastewater treatment practices, decision-makers have not always considered how such practices affect the **flow regimes** of streams. Decisions are often made regarding the location of discharges of treated wastewater without considering whether the water will be returned to the same source from which it was withdrawn.

The disconnection between the regulation of water quantity and water quality is largely a result of disconnected water policies. Georgia's water quality policies have historically been driven by federal legislative mandates and programs, while water quantity policies have emanated from state legislation. However, water quality and quantity, and surface water and groundwater, are interrelated. The water management challenges Georgia will face as it continues along a path of vibrant economic and population growth in the decades ahead will require consistent integration of water policies.

This plan establishes an integrated water policy based on the premise that water resources have certain capacities to provide water for offstream uses and to assimilate pollution, and that water withdrawals and returns can and do affect other **water users**. The full impacts of water management decisions must be considered, and **management practices** must be employed that can mitigate those impacts. For example, when a decision is made to use septic tanks as a water quality management practice, consideration must be given to the effect of that choice on water quantity downstream. Similarly, it is important to consider how increased water withdrawals may facilitate land use decisions that may contribute to significant increases in pollution.

Georgia's water resources have certain capacities that govern their use. The integrated policy recognizes that exceeding these capacities is likely to have detrimental effects on current and/or future users and on the health and well-being of Georgians and/or **natural systems**. The integrated water policy also recognizes, however, that these capacities can, under some circumstances, be supplemented in a **sustainable** manner, provided that is done following specific criteria to ensure that opportunities for other uses and users are not unduly foreclosed. Criteria for specific management practices are included in the plan.

In concert with a comprehensive consideration of the myriad effects of water quantity decisions, the State of Georgia will manage uses of water from surface water and groundwater sources to ensure that sufficient amounts remain to allow all

users and uses – present and future – the opportunity to benefit from the values and opportunities provided by the resources. This comprehensive approach will require consideration of the collective impacts on flow regimes from the set of water withdrawals and water uses for each water source.

Likewise, in concert with a comprehensive consideration of the myriad effects of water quality decisions, the State of Georgia will manage point and **non-point source pollution** to Georgia's waters on a **watershed** basis to ensure the physical, chemical and biological integrity of those waters and maintain **assimilative capacity**, now and in the future. This requires protecting waters that currently meet water quality standards and restoring waters whose physical, chemical, or biological integrity are impaired.

The integrated policy is predicated on the notion that use of the waters of the state must be "reasonable." The legal doctrine of reasonable use guides use of a common resource by riparian owners and has long been the foundation of water management in Georgia. Such reasonable use must be accomplished in a manner that does not unduly foreclose opportunities for other users and uses of the resource.

The first steps in implementing the integrated water policy are the water resource assessments detailed in section 6 of this plan. Once the capacities of water resources have been determined and current and forecasted uses quantified, an array of management practices may be applied to ensure sustainable use of each source – use that will not result in unacceptable adverse consequences to the source or other users of the source.

Integrated Water Policy

- (1) Georgia's economic well-being, the health and welfare of its citizens, and the diversity and health of its natural environment is dependent on the availability of clean water in the rivers, streams, lakes, wetlands, estuaries, coastal waters and groundwaters of the state.
- (2) Water resources in Georgia will be managed in a manner that recognizes the importance of clean water, provides for the protection and/or restoration of water quality, recognizes the **values and opportunities associated with historic flow regimes**, and maintains use of surface waters, groundwaters, and assimilative capacity for current and future uses and users.
- (3) The quantity and quality of water needed in a given water body may vary widely from one natural system to another. Furthermore, the quantity and quality of water needed for a particular natural system may differ from the water needs of a similar natural system in another water body.
- (4) The effective management of Georgia's water resources requires a thorough scientific understanding of the quantity and quality of available surface and groundwater and the extent to which available supplies will support current and future uses and users.
- (5) In accordance with O.C.G.A. §12-5-522(b)(5), water quality and quantity and surface and groundwater are interrelated and require integrated planning.

Implementation Actions

The **Division** will implement the integrated water policy through its existing statutory authority for permitting of water withdrawals and discharge of pollutants under O.C.G.A. §§12-5-31, 12-5-30(a), 12-5-30(b), 12-5-96 and 12-5-105. The Board of Natural Resources will consider, upon adoption of the plan, amending its rules and regulations to provide the following:

1. To require the **Director**, when permitting water withdrawals and discharges of pollutants in accordance with O.C.G.A. §§12-5-31, 12-5-30(a) and 12-5-30(b), in addition to consideration of DNR Rules 391-3-6-.06, 391-3-6-.07, and 391-3-2-.03, to consider the extent to which such permits, if issued, will influence the location, amounts and timing of waters returning to streams or other waters; the character, amounts and timing of flow of pollutants to streams or other waters; and the implications these considerations may have on the continued sustainable use and physical, chemical, and biological integrity of affected waters;
2. To authorize the Director to place appropriate conditions in said permits to reflect full evaluation of such considerations.
3. To make clear that, so long as water permit holders (i.e., withdrawal and/or discharge) are in compliance with permit conditions that require conformance with Georgia's water quality standards, with the Board of Natural Resources May 2001 instream flow protection strategy (or a superceding instream flow policy adopted by the Board of Natural Resources), and with other permit conditions as set by the EPD Director, activities covered under the water permits will be considered to be consistent with protection of natural systems and biological integrity of the water resources to which the permits apply.