

SECTION 12: ENHANCED WATER QUALITY STANDARDS AND MONITORING PRACTICES

Background

Water quality standards and monitoring programs are crucial to the success of Georgia's water planning and protection efforts. Under the federal Clean Water Act, Georgia periodically reviews water quality standards to ensure that correct standards are in place and that the standards are appropriate for the areas of the state in which they are being applied.

Several improvements in the current standards may be necessary. For example, the state currently uses one standard for dissolved oxygen for all of the waters of the state. More than 15% of Georgia's impaired waters are due to a violation of the current statewide dissolved oxygen standard. However, the state's waters have naturally varying levels of dissolved oxygen, and a level of dissolved oxygen that causes a problem in one stream may be healthy in another.

More than 62% of impairments of Georgia's waters are due to a violation of the current bacteria standard. Some research, however, has questioned whether the current fecal coliform standards accurately identify public health concerns. In order to create water quality criteria that most accurately identify impaired waters, EPD must make a significant investment in water monitoring.

The state also needs to revise the designated uses it currently assigns to surface waters. Currently, the designations for wild and scenic river and outstanding national resource water are extraordinarily stringent, but the designations for fishing are not stringent enough for certain sensitive ecosystems. A new classification of Significant Natural Resource Waters will provide a higher, but attainable, level of protection for selected waters. This additional designated use would allow the state more flexibility in determining the most appropriate criteria for waters across the state.

Revisions of water quality standards will be supported by the comprehensive monitoring program and water quality resource assessments described in section 6 of this plan.

Policy: Enhanced Water Quality Standards and Monitoring

- (1) In accordance with O.C.G.A. §12-5-23(c)(9), it is the responsibility of the Director to review water quality standards on a periodic basis and establish or revise standards of water purity for any waters of the state.
- (2) Except for 70 miles of streams located in national forests, all Georgia waters are currently classified as High Quality Waters subject to anti-degradation review. Higher classifications such as Wild River, Scenic River, or Outstanding Natural Resource Waters require stringent controls to preclude any alteration in natural water quality. A new classification of Significant Natural Resource Waters will provide a higher, but attainable, level of protection for selected waters.

- (3) Water quality standards for bacteria should be reviewed and updated based on current research to ensure that the best available criteria are used in Georgia to protect public health.
- (4) Water quality standards for dissolved oxygen should be reviewed and updated to reflect the natural variability in Georgia waters.

Implementation Actions

- (1) The EPD will implement the enhanced monitoring and assessment program developed according to the Water Resource Assessment section of this plan. This program will collect, manage, and use the scientific data and information needed to implement this plan.
- (2) The EPD will work with appropriate stakeholders to evaluate the need to define and provide additional protections for significant natural resource waters in Georgia. The evaluation would include:
 - a. The development of a definition for significant natural resource waters, including the characteristics that would qualify a waterbody for such designation,
 - b. A review of the capacity for current water use classifications, designations, and water quality standards to protect these waters,
 - c. Recommendations for additional actions or criteria needed to protect the waters, and to evaluate economic impact of such a classification, and
 - d. The Board of Natural Resources would receive the evaluation and consider whether rulemaking to alter water use classification should be conducted.
- (3) The Board of Natural Resources will consider, upon adoption of this plan, amending its rules and regulations to update water quality standards for bacteria and dissolved oxygen so that the standards are correct and appropriate for different areas of the state.