

Georgia Department of Natural Resources

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To: Regional Water Planning Councils and Interested Parties

From: F. Allen Barnes



Date: November 3, 2011

Re: FAQs on adoption of Regional Water Plans

The Regional Water Plans are an essential step toward sustainable management of Georgia's water resources. This memo addresses some questions raised during public review of the draft recommended regional water plans and clarifies what it means for EPD to adopt the final regional water plans pursuant to the State Water Plan. Information about the regional water plans and state water plan process can be found at <http://www.georgiawaterplanning.org/> .

What has occurred since public review of the draft recommended Regional Water Plans?

The Water Planning Councils considered comments received during the public comment period from interested parties as well as EPD. The Councils reviewed the comments, revised their plans, and submitted their final recommended regional water plans during September. EPD has reviewed the final recommended regional water plans and determined that they are consistent with the rules for regional water planning and guidance adopted pursuant to those rules. As such, they will be adopted.¹

How will the adopted regional water plans be implemented?

Implementation of regional plans will occur through the following steps:

- Local and regional water users with the ability to develop water infrastructure and apply for permits, grants and loans will implement management practices based upon the menu-oriented, sequential approach outlined in the regional water plans. Short-term practices that address immediate resource needs are emphasized, with more complex or expensive practices to be evaluated for subsequent implementation if warranted.
- EPD will use the regional water plans to guide water permitting decisions and non-regulatory activities in the context of the full existing framework of laws, rules and guidance.²
- EPD will coordinate with our State agency partners and will consult with the Councils and interested parties to set priorities for recommended actions. EPD will continue working to improve the information base for regional water planning and water management.
- In the interim between adoption of the 2011 regional water plans and the five-year review and revision required by the State Water Plan, EPD is committed to supporting and tracking implementation of the plans and to continued engagement with the Water Planning Councils, as envisioned in the adopted plans and as resources allow. As an important near-

¹ State Water Plan, p. 38.

² Information on individual laws and rules can be found at www.gaepd.org/Documents/rules.html. Guidance documents in use by EPD's Watershed Protection Branch can be accessed at www.gaepd.org/Documents/techguide_wpb.html .

term step, EPD supports the Councils' recommendations that the State identify and secure funding and other resources necessary for continuing regional water planning.

How will the adopted regional water plans be used in permitting?

The State Water Plan specifies that regional water plans are to guide decisions regarding permitting.³ The plans provide valuable regional perspectives and each regional water plan will be an important new source of information for EPD permitting programs.

EPD will refer to the adopted regional water plans at the initiation of their review of applications for water permits. Relevant provisions of the plans will provide a framework for review consideration throughout permit evaluation.

EPD's permit decisions will continue to be based on the full existing framework of laws, rules, and guidance, and regional water plans will not be sole determinants for issuance of any new, modified, or expanded permit.

Permit decisions will also continue to rest upon consideration of the body of detailed information provided by an applicant, and adoption of regional water plans will not substantially alter permitting processes. EPD expects that permit applicants will be familiar with the contents of the relevant adopted regional water plan(s) and the ways in which their proposed activity addresses plan provisions.

The regional water plans identify a wide variety of actions to be taken by state agencies. How will these actions be implemented?

Given available resources, EPD and our state agency partners will set priorities among the recommendations for state and agency-specific implementation actions in the adopted regional water plans. In doing so, EPD will be guided by Council goals as stated in their plans and reflected in the implementation and benchmarks sections. EPD will also coordinate with our state agency partners and consult with the Councils and other interested parties, as practicable and following the direction set in the adopted plans.

How will resource assessment models be used once regional water plans are adopted?

To support the regional planning process, EPD developed resource assessment models for surface water availability, groundwater availability, and water quality (assimilative capacity). The mathematical assessment models were used to evaluate the capacity of resources to meet current and projected demands for water use and wastewater discharge. The results of these assessments were provided to Regional Water Planning Councils as initial building blocks for their recommended regional water plans. EPD will continue working to improve the assessment models and information base for regional water planning, as recommended by a number of the Councils. For those seeking additional information, the resource assessment models and supporting documentation are available upon request for review.

³ State Water Plan, p. 38. See also O.C.G.A. §12-5-31(h), §12-5-96(e) and §12-5-522(e).

Water Quality (Assimilative Capacity) Models. Among the models developed for the resource assessments, the assimilative capacity assessment tools will have immediate applicability in permitting decisions. These models were specifically designed for use in permitting of wastewater discharges and may be applied on a case-by-case basis, as appropriate given site-specific circumstances and model characteristics.⁴ These models can also provide insights on the cumulative effects of multiple discharges, including nonpoint source loading in areas where watershed models have been completed, and will be used in EPD's ongoing surface water protection activities.

Groundwater Availability Models. The groundwater availability models evaluate the impact of pumping from prioritized aquifers within specified geographic areas. Most of the modeling focused on prioritized aquifers within the Coastal Plain physiographic province of Georgia south of the Fall Line. As such, these models may, in limited spatial and temporal fashions, inform evaluation of individual groundwater withdrawal permit applications. Use of the tools could follow a stepwise approach in which modeling would be applied if indicated by characteristics of the proposed withdrawal and proximity of existing withdrawals within a defined geographic area. The groundwater assessment tools may also provide insight on cumulative effects of multiple withdrawals and could be used in EPD's ongoing groundwater assessment activities.

Surface Water Availability Models. The models developed for the surface water availability assessments were designed to assess the impacts of aggregated consumptive use of water at specific evaluation points called planning nodes. The models incorporate streamflow metrics and assumptions made for planning purposes and, therefore in their current state, will not be used to evaluate water use impacts at locations other than the planning nodes. The surface water availability assessment models can provide insight on cumulative impacts from withdrawals and their associated consumptive use. Hence, these tools will be used in EPD's ongoing surface water assessment activities only when considering cumulative impacts from withdrawals and their associated consumptive use. Minimum flow provisions of surface water withdrawal permits will continue to be determined following the Rules for Water Quality Control 391-3-6-.07 and Board of Natural Resources 2001 Interim Instream Flow Protection Strategy.

Does adoption by the Director mean that EPD endorses everything in each plan?

The regional water plans include a variety of perspectives and opinions from the Water Planning Councils. These elements provide valuable information on Council viewpoints on a number of issues. However, action on these items may depend upon additional information and adoption of the final recommended plans is not necessarily an endorsement by EPD of these perspectives.

Some regional water plans present a county-level assessment of the need for additional permitted capacity for water withdrawal and wastewater discharge. Considering that water and wastewater needs can change quite rapidly, adoption of the regional water plans should not be interpreted as EPD endorsement or approval of specific infrastructure projects to meet the

⁴ The Middle Chattahoochee Planning Council has recommended that the watershed and lake models for the Chattahoochee River Basin undergo peer review before being used in any permitting decisions. The

identified need for permitted capacity. Nor should omission of a project from an adopted regional water plan be interpreted as EPD disapproval or denial of specific infrastructure projects to meet the identified need for permitted capacity. Additional information and review will be required prior to any EPD action on permits for any specific infrastructure project.

Do the actions recommended in the regional water plans address all of Georgia’s major water challenges?

With the adoption of the regional water plans, it is important to note that there are a number of parallel activities under way to address Georgia’s critical water issues. The regional plans reflect many of those parallel activities and will be implemented in concert with them. State activities on critical issues highlighted in each regional plan will continue to be discussed with Regional Water Planning Councils, as envisioned in the adopted regional water plans and as practicable given available resources.

Can the plans be changed once they are adopted?

Given the menu approach described above, the regional water plans provide considerable flexibility to adapt to new information and changing circumstances after EPD adopts the final recommended regional water plans. New information or changes in circumstances can and will be addressed through implementation decisions made following plan adoption.

The State Water Plan requires that, every five years, each regional water plan shall be subject to review by the Water Planning Council following EPD guidance. Per the State Water Plan, the five-year review is to consider current resource assessments, updates of water and wastewater forecasts where necessary, and progress on plan benchmarks, among other factors.⁵ The five-year review and revision provides an opportunity to modify the adopted plans to reflect new information or changed circumstances and to revise management practices to more effectively address resource constraints. It also ensures an on-going regional perspective on sustainable management of Georgia’s water resources.

models could be revised as a result of this and other reviews.

⁵ State Water Plan, p. 38.