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Section 8

Future Issues and Challenges

8.1 Where Do We Go From Here?

The Dynamic Process of Basin Management

This plan represents another step in managing the water resources in the Oconee River basin, but not the final step. It is important for all to understand that effective basin management is ongoing and dynamic because changes in resource use and conditions occur continually, as do changes in management resources and perspectives. Therefore, management planning and implementation must remain flexible and adapt to changing needs and capabilities.

Building on Past Improvements

For the past few decades, management efforts have resulted in substantial improvements in water quality, and reduction in pollutant loading for many waters (see examples in Section 4). Many of these improvements stem from increased wastewater treatment by municipalities and industries, and from landowners' implementation of best management practices that help reduce soil and contaminant runoff. Indeed, many of the waterbodies in the basin are fully supporting their designated uses. The assessments summarized in this plan show, however, that not all waters are at the level of quality deemed necessary to support designated uses. There are waters still in need of restoration and attention.

Participation by Many Different Stakeholders

The current and proposed strategies summarized in this plan do not “solve” all existing problems. Many of the unsolved problems will require actions by stakeholders other than those that have been involved in planning to date. For example, resolution of fecal coliform bacteria problems will typically require local government actions (e.g., dealing with urban storm water issues and leaking and overflowing sanitary sewers) and

private landowner actions (e.g., correcting failed septic systems, using best management practices in animal operations and land application of waste residuals). Other issues will require significant additional time and effort before they are addressed sufficiently (e.g., restoration of riparian zones and aquatic habitat). Some of these issues might require making trial management efforts and adapting those efforts over time based on observations of what works well, particularly where there is no 100 percent effective solution evident at the time of strategy development. Future management should focus on the priorities among these continuing needs, as determined by communities and partners in management.

In addition, continued growth in population is expected in the Oconee basin (see Section 2). This growth will place additional demands on water resources and require corresponding responses in management. More people means more water use (drinking water, industrial consumption, irrigation), more storm water runoff (from impervious surfaces of new houses, roads, industries, businesses, and parking lots), and more contamination (sediment; nutrients; organic material; pesticides, herbicides, and other toxics). Therefore, it is essential that stakeholders continue to work together to plan and implement the most cost-effective ways of restoring and protecting water resources.

Blending Regulatory and Voluntary Approaches

Although the regulatory authorities of agencies such as EPD are important for the protection and restoration of Georgia's waters, RBMP partners will continue to emphasize voluntary and cooperative approaches to watershed management. This will take time and will be very challenging. Long-term protection means that the people, local governments, and businesses must learn collectively what is needed for protection and adapt their lifestyles and operations accordingly. Experience indicates that people are much more likely to buy into proposed management solutions in which they have a say and control over how they spend their time and money. The challenge in the future, therefore, is to continue to "build bridges" between regulatory and voluntary efforts, using each where they best serve the people and natural resources of Georgia.

8.2 Working to Strengthen Planning and Implementation Capabilities

Understanding One Another's Roles

Increasing awareness and understanding of the roles and capabilities of local, state, and federal partners is one of the keys to future basin management success for the Oconee River. Lack of understanding can lead to finger pointing and frustration on the part of all involved. Increasing opportunities for stakeholders to develop this awareness and understanding should result in more effective management actions.

This basin plan provides one opportunity for stakeholders to increase their awareness of conditions in the basin, and learn about ongoing and proposed new management strategies. Within this context, stakeholders can develop a better understanding of certain roles and responsibilities. For example, this basin plan points out several areas where EPD has regulatory authority and corresponding duties, including

- Establishing water quality use classifications and standards.
- Assessing and reporting on water quality conditions.
- Facilitating development of River Basin Management Plans.
- Issuing permits for point source discharges of treated wastewater, municipal storm water discharges as required, and land application systems.

- Issuing water supply permits.
- Enforcing compliance with permit conditions.

There are many areas, however, where organizations or entities other than EPD are responsible. For example,

- Septic tank permitting and inspection (county health departments) and maintenance (individual landowners).
- Land development (land use) and zoning ordinances (local governments).
- Sanitary sewer and storm water ordinances (local governments).
- Water supply source water protection ordinances (local governments).
- Urban storm water and drainage (local governments).
- Erosion and sediment control (local governments).
- Siting of industrial parks, landfills, and wastewater treatment facilities (local governments).
- Floodplain management (FEMA, local governments).
- Implementation of forestry best management practices (landowners and Georgia Forestry Commission).
- Implementation of agricultural best management practices (landowners with support from state and federal agricultural agencies).
- Proper use, handling, storage, and disposal of chemicals (businesses, landowners, municipalities, counties, etc.).

These are but a few of the areas involved, but they illustrate how responsibilities are spread across many stakeholders in each basin. Additionally, there are other agencies and organizations that assist planning and implementation in many of these areas—regional development centers; federal, state, and local technical assistance programs; citizens groups; and business associations. As stakeholders become more familiar with one another’s responsibilities and capabilities, they will more frequently become aware of appropriate partners with whom they can work to address their issues of concern.

Using the RBMP Framework to Improve Communication

Raising awareness frequently involves two-way communication. The RBMP framework’s interactive planning and outreach sessions provide additional opportunities that support two-way communication. For example, Basin Technical Planning Team meetings provide opportunities for partners to share information on their responsibilities and capabilities with one another. Similarly, Local Advisory Committee meetings and stakeholder meetings provide opportunities for citizens, businesses, government agencies, associations, and others to share information and learn from one another. Although often requiring considerable time, these interactions are critical to the future of management in the basin because they build the working relationships and trust that are essential to carrying out effective, integrated actions.

Continuing to Streamline Our Efforts

Increased coordination will also result if partners in this approach continue to streamline their efforts. There are many laws and requirements with related and complementary goals, e.g., Georgia’s Growth Strategies Act, Planning Act, River Corridor Protection Act, Comprehensive Ground Water Management Plan, and River

Basin Management Planning requirements, in addition to federal Clean Water Act water quality regulations and Safe Drinking Water Act source water protection requirements. Partners should continue to find ways to make actions under these laws consistent and complementary by eliminating redundancy and leveraging efforts. Again, partners can use the forums within the RBMP framework (e.g., river basin team and advisory committees) to discuss and implement ideas to streamline roles and make the best use of their funds and staff resources.

8.3 Addressing the Impacts from Continued Population Growth and Land Development

Supporting Consistent Implementation of Protection Measures

To address the impacts from anticipated population growth and increased land development in the basin, management will need to build on the increased understanding of roles and to use forums to coordinate and develop more specific action plans. Historically, mitigating impacts from newly developed areas has been approached mostly on a case-by-case basis. Unfortunately, this approach has resulted in inconsistent planning and implementation of water resource protection measures. River basin planning offers an opportunity for a more consistent approach by making it easier for landowners, local governments, and businesses to work together at the watershed and basin levels.

One way that Georgia EPD will address this issue is by approving only new and expanding permits for water withdrawals and wastewater discharges that are consistent with the basin plan and meet the intent of the Georgia Planning Act. Rather than waiting for the permit application process, however, local governments can work together and with EPD to resolve some of these issues in advance. There are incentives for organizations such as the Georgia Water Pollution Control Association (WPCA), the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA), the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG), and Regional Development Centers (RDCs) to work out consistent methods to conduct watershed assessments in developing areas and for improving the implementation of protection measures as development occurs. EPD, DCA, and other partners can coordinate by facilitating discussion at RBMP meetings and supporting local initiatives aimed at this issue. An excellent example of this cooperative effort is the Georgia Water Management Campaign being facilitated by the Association of County Commissioners in cooperation with the Georgia EPD, the Georgia Municipal Association, and the Georgia Environmental Facilities Authority.

8.4 The Next Iteration of the Basin Cycle

Building on Previous, Ongoing, and Planned Efforts

As discussed above and in Section 7.3, there is more work to do to adequately restore and protect all of Georgia's water resources. After focusing on implementing this plan, the Oconee River basin will enter into its second iteration of the basin management cycle (scheduled for mid-1998). The next cycle will provide an opportunity to review issues that were not fully addressed during the first cycle and to reassess and identify any new priority issues. In other words, future management efforts can and should build on the foundation created by previous, ongoing, and already planned management actions.

Providing a Historical Reference for the Next Basin Plan

Partners will not have to “start from scratch” during the next iteration of the basin planning cycle. The information in this document provides a historical account of what is known and planned to date. Stakeholders in the Oconee basin will know what was accomplished in the first iteration and therefore will be able to focus on enhancing ongoing efforts or filling gaps. Data collection and public discussion activities scheduled early in the next cycle can draw on information in the plan to identify areas in need of additional monitoring, assessment, and strategy development.

8.5 Priorities for Additional Data Collection

In 1996, monitoring efforts were focused on the Coosa, Oconee, and Tallapoosa River basins in accordance with the EPD basin planning schedule. Intensive monitoring will return to the Oconee basin in support of the next iteration of the basin planning cycle in 1999. Prior to that time, EPD and partners will develop a strategic monitoring plan for the Oconee. The monitoring plan will have two major components—general assessment of water quality status within the basin and targeted assessment to address priority issues and concerns.