

Pro & Con: Will the Water Stewardship Act solve Georgia's water problem?

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YES: Bill promotes measured and responsible conservation initiatives.

By Mary Kay Woodworth

Much has happened since Georgia's drought ended in June 2009. Rivers and streams are flowing and Lake Lanier is full. But Gov. Sonny Perdue continues negotiations with Alabama and Florida for the use of that water, with a federal judge's ruling and deadline looming.

Declaring the end to the drought last summer, Perdue stated, "Georgians have seen the most severe drought on record, and have proven their ability to conserve and manage our state's most precious resource. We have become more educated about water conservation, and have taken significant steps towards ensuring a long-term solution."

Thanks to the Water Stewardship Act of 2010, which appears headed to Perdue's desk in the next few weeks, Georgia's citizens now have a plan in place to reach that long-term solution and the governor has a tool to show Alabama and Florida that we are serious about water conservation.

This bill will reshape attitudes and opportunities for responsible and measured water conservation initiatives in Georgia.

It has received input and direction from a vast array of business, environmental and service provider sectors resulting in a broad-brush approach to enhance water stewardship while protecting Georgia's economic future.

Addressing both indoor and outdoor water use, it will require efforts by all users to actively conserve, and is a win-win for Georgia's citizens.

This bill says much about what Georgia can do to conserve responsibly and manage water resources in a more effective manner.

Georgia's landscape industry supports the goals of this bill because it demonstrates that our industry and our state:

- Allows sufficient daily outdoor water use for landscape maintenance and new plantings in addition to encouraging drip irrigation and other efficient water use technologies.
- Continues educating consumers about the importance of efficient irrigation, proper soil conditioning and plant selection to create a healthy, functional landscape.
- Will continue to utilize Georgia EPD for coordinating with water authorities to manage water use restrictions during a drought as has proven to be extremely successful the past two years.
- Supports farmers who grow the trees, shrubs, turf grass and flowers and sell these landscape plant materials by providing consumers with a manageable outdoor water use schedule.
- Will improve efficiencies impacting agribusiness, by initiating a program to refine the state's agricultural water withdrawal permitting system for surface and groundwater uses. This will provide more accurate data regarding farm irrigation use and better

demonstrate the location of these systems across the state.

- Will develop programs that will highlight leaks in water delivery systems and focus our attention to real water losses.
- Should continue planning to site and construct much needed new reservoirs and expand existing reservoirs to store more of our water.

The definition of conserve is “to use carefully, avoiding waste.” Water conservation through efficiency and education should remain a key component of everyone’s efforts, and this bill promotes these goals.

The residents and businesses of Georgia will continue to work toward a culture of conservation, adopting best management practices in their indoor and outdoor water use, making efficient water use an everyday practice.

We applaud the members of the Georgia General Assembly and Perdue for their leadership on this important issue.

Mary Kay Woodworth is president of the Georgia Urban Agriculture Council.

NO: Bill ignores two largest water hogs — agriculture and electric utilities.

By David Kyler

Water conservation efforts recently passed in the General Assembly are impressive in concept, but the bill fails to address enormous waste by Georgia’s biggest water consumers — agriculture and power plants.

And it does nothing to prevent Atlanta from robbing the water resources of downstream and down-state communities to help prop up

the metro region’s increasingly unmanageable and costly sprawl. We strongly support a separate bill proposed to strictly control interbasin transfers.

Note that the watering restriction exemptions offered by the stewardship bill do not include farmers, who as a group are one of the largest water users in the state. Enormous amounts of water lost to evaporation will continue to be caused by megafarms using spray irrigation, with losses of 40 percent or more — hundreds of millions of gallons daily — that will be permitted even during the hottest period of the day when the greatest waste occurs.

Likewise, Georgia’s other giant water grabbers, power-plants, are being treated as sacred cows in legislative conservation proposals, which leave them wholly untouched. Despite power plants consuming hundreds of millions of gallons a day in evaporative cooling, EPD continues permitting them as if they’re unrelated to water management concerns.

Meanwhile, waterless and clean energy options such as solar and wind power remain largely ignored — treated as eccentric and impractical, in defiance of abundant examples of their success elsewhere.

Doubling the size of Plant Vogtle with the construction of two new nuclear reactors will cause the additional loss of 40 million gallons a day from the Savannah River. The Savannah is already overstressed by water users and polluters in both Georgia and South Carolina, as indicated by the recent finding that it’s the fourth most polluted river in the nation.

Not only does Plant Vogtle squander water, but it wastes money, and does so big-time. When expanded it will be one of the most intensely subsidized facilities ever built.

The unstated but disturbing outcome is that nearly all water to be conserved under the curiously incomplete Georgia approach will be squeezed from 20 percent (or fewer) of the water users, as measured in total water consumed. In other words, for hidden political reasons we are severely restricting Georgia's water conservation potential by giving a free pass to the major water users.

This will result in building more costly and inefficient reservoirs, unnecessary exploitation and degradation of Georgia's aquifers and rivers, and an ever greater burden on taxpayers who will have to accommodate the unyielding demands of urban sprawl, agriculture and the power industry. And all this will occur under the guise of a misleading claim to be taking adequate steps toward state water stewardship.

Depriving our five major coastal river systems of flow will harm marshes and inter-tidal fish habitat that are vital to both coastal tourism business and marine life in this region — worth billions of dollars annually.

With even a modest 10 percent reduction in consumption by the major users, Georgia could save four or five times the amount of water to be conserved by taking the limited steps recently adopted for the smaller users.



Dare Georgians demand open, fact-based deliberations on water conservation? If not, we can only hope that the more comprehensive and transparent, and thus less contrived, "water wars" negotiations will force Georgia toward a legitimate water stewardship program.

Ultimately, Georgia may be better served by water warriors in Florida and Alabama than by our own state's leadership.

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