



Meeting Summary

Upper Flint Regional Water Council

Flint Energies, Reynolds, GA

November 13, 2023

Welcome & Introductions

Kristin Rowles (GWPPC) welcomed everyone and introduced the Council members and Council support team. She asked the members to share location ideas for future meetings. Kristin reminded the Council that we are in the implementation phase of the planning cycle. This means the Council should consider grants, committee work, and outreach opportunities. She then reviewed the agenda and objectives for today's meeting and mentioned that there will be a committee meeting after we adjourn today to discuss flows in the Upper Flint River Basin.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member noted that we should hold an outreach presentation with the Lower Flint-Ochlockonee Council.

Chair's Report

Chairman Graft thanked everyone for attending today's meeting. He also thanked the Council for their efforts during the planning cycle and for continuing to operate on a consensus. He also noted the importance of our discussion today with GAEPD on Frost Protection Permitting.

EPD Updates

Johanna Smith (GAEPD) updated the Council on the Seed Grant Application Period, which closed this past October. The Upper Flint Water Planning Region did not receive any seed grant applications, but the next funding cycle will be announced in July 2024. Johanna also noted that EPD's issuance of the construction stormwater general permits was challenged this past July. This means construction sites will continue to be covered under the 2018 general permits and will remain in effect throughout the duration of the legal challenge. GAEPD has also released a draft Guidance for Request to Disturb 50 Acres or More under the NPDES Construction Stormwater Permits. There will be a virtual meeting on December 7, with public comments

available until December 15th on the draft. Johanna mentioned there will be a new Drinking Water Operator Classification, which will apply to operators of groundwater systems serving a population of 1,000 – 9,999.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member asked who challenged EPD's issuance of the construction of stormwater general permits in July? Ania Truszczynski (GAEPD) noted the organization was the South River Watershed Alliance.

Upper Flint Flows Seed Grant Discussion

Ben Emanuel (American Rivers) presented on the Upper Flint Flows Seed Grant and he thanked the Council for allowing the time on the agenda for this discussion. He noted their partnership with the River Basin Center at the University of Georgia and their collaboration with conservationists and water utilities. The Seed Grant's project area is in the Piedmont Flint River Basin which contains the northern portion of this planning region. He mentioned that the project is mostly focused on Flint River flows during droughts since 2000. Ben noted how his previous presentation to the Council, from 2021, provides background on this Seed Grant which covered drought resilience for people and nature in the Upper Flint River Basin.

This Seed Grant has 3 main objectives: 1) predict ecological consequences of drought of varying severity and duration, 2) evaluate the potential for various drought-response management actions to mitigate ecosystem effects at various drought severities, and 3) evaluate the potential for long-term management actions to increase drought resilience in the basin (using the BEAM model from GAEPD). They will be using BEAM to analyze certain thresholds for low flows along the river. Ben noted that the Plan's Information Need (IN-12) dealing with feasibility assessments of interventions to improve flows will be touched by the Seed Grant's goals. They are also looking for stakeholder input and engagement along the way to inform priorities for various potential management actions, any additional ideas for assessment, or collaboration in the interpretation of flow benefits expected from management actions.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member noted that not one aspect of IN-12 takes priority at the moment, but he would like to see the cost assessments in order for the Council to make priority decisions on management actions.

A Council member noted that this afternoon's committee will discuss this seed grant project. He mentioned that a cost-benefit analysis is important for the Upper Flint River Basin as well as a consideration for geography. He discussed looking at opportunities upstream and being cautious of those past the jurisdiction line. He noted he was surprised by the GA-FIT work with drought actions and thresholds for low flows and that the scale for flow replenishment makes a

huge difference at different locations during drought.

The Council noted that water storage can look vastly different between different people.

A Council member asked if Ben knows the percentage of floodplains in the Upper Flint headwaters that have been destroyed? Ben answered he does not know the exact percentage, but on mainstem river it's a lot of floodplains that has been impaired.

Frost Protection Permitting

Dr. Ania Truszczynski (GAEPD) thanked the Council for allowing the time for an update on the Frost Protection Permitting. She began by describing Subarea 4 of the ACF Basin, which is an area of high interconnectivity between the Flint River and the Floridan Aquifer. Dr. Truszczynski then covered a timeline of agricultural water withdrawal permitting and the permitting moratorium. New permits for frost protection permits are currently not an option for farmers in the Lower Flint River Basin because of the current permit moratorium, but crops like blueberries and citrus cannot be cultivated successfully without frost protection, which requires large amounts of water. Dr. Truszczynski noted that because water use under the proposed Frost Protection Permitting framework would be limited to the recharge season and limited in quantity, the issuance of permits should have a negligible effect on flows. She mentioned that this would be a good first step in re-evaluating the permitting approach for agricultural water withdrawals in the Lower Flint River Basin.

GAEPD began accepting applications for Frost Protection Permits from the Floridan Aquifer in the moratorium area in September of this year, after holding a public comment period in the Summer. In the proposed framework, surface water withdrawals would not be permitted for Frost Protection Permits. For Floridan Aquifer withdrawals, frost protection permitting would only be permitted in the "green zones" defined by the 2006 Flint River Basin Plan. Dr. Truszczynski mentioned that GAEPD received 27 substantive comments on the framework, focused on the following topics: exploring frost protection permitting in the "red" and "yellow" zones, whether variable rate motors should be allowed, whether telemetry should be required, and whether surface water should be an allowable source for frost protection. Farmers in the yellow and red zones of the suspension area can submit Letters of Interest to GAEPD. So far, GAEPD have received 2 applications from the Floridan Aquifer in the green zone (totaling 70 acres) and 16 letters of interest in the red zone (totaling 165 acres). Dr. Truszczynski noted that the development of a Habitat Conservation Plan would act as a tool to help protect endangered and threatened mussels in the Lower Flint River Basin. This would provide farmers with regulatory certainty and protect water resources.

GA-FIT Report

Mark Masters (GWPPC) presented updates on the GA-FIT project. He emphasized the importance of people in the success of GA-FIT, which has an advisory board composed of Upper Flint and Lower Flint-Ochlockonee Water Planning Council members. GA-FIT's voluntary irrigation suspension auction resulted in about 80 participants last year and 60 participants during this irrigating season. GA-FIT's Drought SWAP is looking to provide farmers with deep groundwater wells as an alternative to their surface water sources to use for irrigation withdrawals only during drought periods. We are currently working with landowners in the Lower Flint River Basin to conduct field assessments for contracting. Drought SWAP is looking to install 16 monitoring wells to provide additional data on Claiborne and Cretaceous Aquifers. Drought SWAP is also conducting mussel surveying throughout the project area and obtaining real field-level data at various sites. Mark mentioned they are happy with the participation in both projects and are excited to receive the Habitat Conservation Planning (HCP) Grant from USFWS to do additional habitat work in southwest Georgia. The HCP is being drafted and will be reviewed by the GA-FIT advisory board members soon.

Fact Sheet Review

Meagan Szydzik (GWPPC) reviewed the draft Fact Sheets with the Council. This is a summary document of the 2023 Upper Flint Regional Water Plan that provides background information, key water resources issues addressed by the Council, a summary of the resource assessment results, and lists the high priority management practices. This Fact Sheet will be useful for outreach opportunities for the Council during this implementation phase of the planning cycle. Meagan asked the Council if they could review the document and provide edits or comments to be incorporated before it is published on the Georgia Water Planning Website.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member mentioned it would be helpful to include any cost-benefit analyses from IN-12 on the Fact Sheet in the future.

Feral Pigs Presentation

Steve Golladay (The Jones Center at Ichauway) and Justine Smith (UGA) presented their research on feral pigs and water quality. Justine opened up the floor for the Council's experiences with feral pigs. She then presented background information on the origin of feral pigs within Georgia. Feral pigs are a major concern to communities for their diseases, threats to livestock and cropland, and bioterrorism. In 2007, wild pigs were estimated to contribute approximately \$1.5 billion annual damage in the United States. Today the estimate is closer to \$2.5 billion in damages. Wild pig's diet also overlaps with native game species. Some management options Justine noted involved daytime or nighttime shootings, aerial gunning, drop nets, or corral trapping. The National Feral Swine Damage Management Program provides

funding for projects tasked with studying and controlling wild pig population.

Steve Golladay discussed the damage wild pigs contribute to streams, wetlands, and riparian areas, which was studied through the Albany GA Pilot Project. Wild pigs increase soil disturbances, erosion, nutrient release, and contribute to loss of plant and animal species. With that being said, the watershed effects are not well known. The water quality data from the project was found to be good, although water sampling has limitations. They also found that proximity to project boundaries and refuges from control measures may result in water quality degradation.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member stated that the wild pig population is out of control and incredibly destructive to crops for producers.

A Council member asked why there was a sudden population growth of wild pigs? Steve answered that the lack of native predators, early age of first reproduction, and high fecundity contribute to their rapid population growth.

A Council member noted they would like to see more action in large scale reduction of wild pigs. They also mentioned that intensive work in reduction of wild pigs in a specific area may produce an increased population in a different area.

A Council member mentioned that the overproduction of deer should also be a concern to note.

A Council member discussed correlating the e-DNA from wild pigs with water quality data and using the results and interpretations in our next water planning cycle.

A Council member noted the incentives to control wild pigs are extremely high in the forestry and agriculture communities and this should be the case for water quality sectors as well.

Next Steps

Meagan Szydzik (GWPPC) asked the Council to let the Team know if there are any additional topics of interest they would like to hear about in future meetings. She also mentioned they should look out for email communications from her about scheduling for the next meeting in the new year.

Public Comment

No public comments were made.

Adjourn

Chairman Graft thanked the Council for their discussion and participation today and encouraged the Council to bring up any topics of interest for our next Council meeting.

Upper Flint River Basin Flows Committee

The Committee met immediately following the Council meeting. They discussed objectives and goals needed to address Information Need 12 (IN-12) from the 2023 Upper Flint Regional Water Plan, which assesses interventions to improve flows in the Upper Flint River Basin. Additional details and meeting scheduling for the Committee will be forthcoming.

Council Members Attending November 13, 2023 Meeting

Barry Blount	Terrell Hudson
Michael Bowens*	Brandon Lewis
Gene Brunson	Gordon Rogers
Donald Chase	Butch Turner
Beth English	Teel Warbington
Steve Fry	Joel Wood
Adam Graft	
Jack Holbrook	

Other Attendees

Rob Bocarro (BV)	Jason Howard (BV)
Meagan Szydzik (GWPPC)	Kristin Rowles (GWPPC)
Mark Masters (GWPPC)	Ania Truszczynski (GAEPD)
Clete Barton (GAEPD)	Johanna Smith (GAEPD)
Ben Emanuel (American Rivers)	Peg Wimer (Bridgestone)
Paul McDaniel (GFC)	Laura Schneider (RVRC)
Bryce Trotter (GA Milk Producers)	Stephen Simpson (Flint Riverkeeper)
Justine Smith (UGA)	Steve Golladay (The Jones Center at Ichauway)

**By videoconference*