



Meeting Summary

Lower Flint Ochlockonee Regional Water Council

The Candy Room

Albany, GA

November 12, 2024

Welcome

Meagan Taylor (GWPPC) welcomed everyone and thanked participants for attending. Meagan had the Council members and observers introduce themselves. She then reviewed the agenda and objectives for the day's meeting. She also informed the Council on updates occurring to Statewide Regional Water Planning. The Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center is to serve as the new lead contractor for all 10 of the State's Regional Water Councils. There will be more details to follow, but Council members should look forward to more joint meetings with neighboring councils, statewide educational webinars, and implementation assessments on their region. She noted that members should be encouraged to reach out to the team with any ideas on future meeting topics for their region as well as the webinars.

Chair's Report

Chairman Campbell welcomed and thanked the Council members for attending and encouraged the team to begin the agenda.

EPD Updates

Jennifer Welte (GAEPD) introduced the new manager of Regional Water Planning with GAEPD, Russell Nix. Russell mentioned that they plan to hire 2 additional positions to support the water planning process.

Jennifer presented updates for the 2025 Seed Grant Application period, which ended on October 31, 2024. No applications were received in this region, but the next funding cycle will be announced in July 2025.

Jennifer also updated the Council on GAEPD's three construction stormwater general permits that were legally challenged in July 2023. The three NPDES general permits authorize the

discharge of stormwater from sites where construction activities occur through July 31, 2028. The legal challenge was resolved on August 22, 2024.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member asked how many Seed Grant proposals were submitted statewide. Jennifer answered that 9 applications were submitted during this cycle.

Agricultural Water Permitting Updates

Dr. Anna Truszczynski provided a set of updates on the progress of varying initiatives to modify or update the agricultural water use permitting process in the region. She first provided an overview of the geography of the region and a recent timeline of permitting updates between the start of agricultural water permitting in Georgia and today. GAEPD is working to develop an Incidental Take Permit through a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) with the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center at Albany State University to address endangered and threatened mussel species in the Lower Flint River Basin. The inclusion of the GAEPD agricultural water permitting program in the HCP will allow GAEPD to provide new types of permits as well as expanding permits and new compliance tools. Additional capacity will also need to be identified to expand or issue new permits in subarea 4. Dr. Truszczynski noted that there have been some modifications to the 2012 water withdrawal permit suspension. This includes the 2023 frost protection permits and the 2024 modification to remove surface waters in the Ochlockonee and Suwannee basins.

GAEPD is exploring modifying the 2012 suspension to allow for new or modified permits for Floridan Aquifer wells with a few specific conditions in the permits such as:

- 25-year terms
- Irrigation efficiency requirements
- Water conservation plans
- Telemetry
- Restrictions on aesthetic and recreational uses
- Drought Conditions

The drought conditions would be checked daily and would be determined using a composite trigger that would consider readings from 15 USGS monitoring wells in the area and measure them against their 10th percentile water level. If 5 of these wells hit that 10th percentile measurement concurrently, then drought restrictions would be put in place over the entirety of the suspension area. With a drought restriction, the permittee would cease withdrawals from the Floridan aquifer within 24 hours of a restriction being put in place.

GAEPD plans to have several agricultural water withdrawal compliance tools for permits. This includes the correction of existing permits, shifting acreage, using volumetric permits, drought restricted permits, and implementing compliance and technical assistance for permits.

GAEPD hosted a series of meetings from April to June of this past year to discuss permit conditions and compliance tools in several locations. GAEPD also received 10 public comment letters after the meetings took place. Several commenters expressed concern about who could receive volumetric permits and under which conditions. Volumetric permits are not an option for new users or those irrigating without a permit. Commenters also requested that GAEPD consider granting permits without drought-restrictions to those who were withdrawing water prior to the 2012 suspension. GAEPD will issue permits consistent with the 2006 Flint River Basin Plan and current statutes and rules, for acres put into irrigation pre-2012 suspension in the green or yellow zones or pre-1999 suspension in the red zone. Lastly, a few commenters requested that “entities” (not just the same person) be allowed to engage in acreage shift compliance options. Persons, as defined by the Groundwater Use Act and the Georgia Water Quality Control Act, can be considered “the same” for permit consolidation and acreage transfer purposes if both entities have the same Beneficial Owner.

Dr. Truszczynski lastly noted that GAEPD will begin accepting applications for new and expanded withdrawals from the Floridan aquifer for permits with drought restrictions and compliance-related applications for agricultural water withdrawal permits on April 1, 2025.

Discussion Summary:

It was noted that the Georgia Farm Bureau and the UGA Extension Office would both work to disseminate GAEPD’s agricultural water withdrawal permit options and upcoming deadlines for applications to farmers in the region.

GA-FIT Report

Mark Masters (GWPPC) provided a series of updates regarding the GA-FIT program including Drought SWAP initiatives and discussed developments and future steps needed to improve resiliency and water resources in the region. Currently, 13 monitoring wells have been installed throughout the project area to provide assessments of groundwater, aquatic ecosystems, and stream flows. Recruitment and applications are underway with 150 landowner agreements now in place. Field assessments and prioritization of sites are being conducted with 52 test holes already drilled. GAEPD has also permitted around 25 Landowner Contracts. The project team and the GA-FIT Advisory Board members have actively been meeting quarterly and working on the draft HCP document. There have also been approximately 2,500 dirt road stream crossings identified in the basin that raise concern for erosion and sedimentation issues. This is being addressed currently by the Better Back Roads program where 3 sites have already been remediated. Mark then explained some of the modeling approaches and results for estimating

the take of freshwater mussels covered under the Habitat Conservation Plan. Take is calculated by analyzing the differences in the amount and duration of habitat availability under different scenarios of water use.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member asked if all USGS wells have drought condition data accessible for public access? It was noted that monitoring wells and USGS wells are on the USGS website.

Steve Golladay (Jones Center) thanked landowners for access to the freshwater mussel survey sites and for their cooperation.

Public Comment

Jennifer Welte (GAEPD) provided brief updates on Albany's Combined Sewer Overflow separation project.

Gordon Rogers (Flint Riverkeeper) encouraged the consideration of joining the ACF Stakeholders governing board.

Jeff Nunnery (GA Farm Bureau) gave a brief update on the impact seen statewide from Hurricane Helene. He noted that the storm affected around 61 counties in the state and resulted in a loss of nearly 1.5 million acres of timber, one-third of the state's cotton crop, and some loss of livestock and tobacco crop. He mentioned that the GA Farm Bureau incurred around 16,000 claims and there is a hurricane relief fund for farmers on their website.

Ryan Thompson (Harvey Drilling Corp) noted that there may be some concern associated with permitted acreage for agricultural water withdrawal being converted into solar farms in the region.

Next Steps

Meagan Taylor (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 upcoming meetings.

Adjourn

Chairman Campbell thanked those who attended today's meeting before adjourning for lunch.

Council Members Attending November 12, 2024 Meeting

Murray Campbell

Calvin Perry

Mark DeMott

Richard Royal

David Dixon

Jay Smith

Connie Hobbs

Other Attendees

Meagan Taylor (GWPPC)

Clete Barton (GAEPD)

Mark Masters (GWPPC)

Russell Nix (GAEPD)

Megan Stanley (GWPPC)*

Anna Truszczynski (GAEPD)

Jud Turner (GWPPC)

Jeff Nunnery (GA Farm Bureau)

Jennifer Welte (GAEPD)

Gordon Rogers (Flint Riverkeeper)

Bert Early (GFC)

Steve Golladay (Jones Center)

Clark Coarsey (Bishop Well)

**By videoconference*