



Meeting Summary

Upper Flint Regional Water Council

Flint Energies, Reynolds, GA

November 13, 2024

Welcome & Introductions

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.

A Council member asked if there had been any updates on Council member appointments. Meagan noted that Chairman Graft along with other members had been working closely with GAEPD to coordinate names for consideration by appointing officials.

Chair's Report

Chairman Graft thanked everyone for attending. He expressed optimism about all the good work underway in the Council's footprint and noted that their plan isn't just "sitting on a shelf." He welcomed discussions and encouraged the Council to ask questions throughout the meeting.

EPD Updates

Johanna Smith (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.

Johanna presented updates for the 2025 Seed Grant Application period, which ended on October 31, 2024. One application was submitted in the Upper Flint region. The proposed Seed Grant is on "Water Monitoring and Education of Environmental PFAS Exposure in

Urban/Agricultural Interfaces” and will be discussed further in the next presentation. It was also noted that the next funding cycle will be announced in July 2025.

Johanna 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.

Seed Grant Proposal in the Upper Flint Region

Dr. Gary Hawkins (UGA) presented his work with Whitney Pagan (UGA) on their Seed Grant proposal to monitor contaminants of concern (PFAS) in the Flint River and identify how concentrations of pollutants transform and transport south of Atlanta from urban into agricultural regions. Their proposed project aims to provide critical insights into urban pollutant risks, inform sustainable urban development policies, and aid agricultural producers in adapting to emerging water quality challenges. Dr. Hawkins explained what materials PFAS can be found in and how they make their way into the surrounding environment. Their proposal directly implements Management Practice WQ-2 (Improve implementation of nonpoint source controls), WQ-4 (Improve water quality monitoring and assessment), and Management Practice DM-3 (Encourage all water providers to implement education and outreach programs) from the Upper Flint Regional Water Plan.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member mentioned water utilities are in a position to meet PFAS requirements but may be apprehensive about additional monitoring. They also noted public education is key but will be a challenge and should help build trust with utilities.

A Council member thanked Dr. Hawkins for the presentation and clarity provided on such a complicated topic. They asked if Dr. Hawkins would consider making a presentation on PFAS to educate other groups and organizations? Dr. Hawkins answered yes, they would need to request this through their county extension agent.

A Council member asked if they have sampling sites selected yet? Dr. Hawkins mentioned that they have 2 sites currently selected in their proposal but would like to coordinate with stakeholders on suggested locations. They plan to have 6 total sampling sites.

Jennifer Welte (GAEPD) provided additional clarification on the State’s upcoming public process related to PFAS regulations.

Upper Basin Flows Seed Grant Project Update

Ben Emanuel (American Rivers) and Laura Rack (UGA) presented on the Upper Flint Flows Seed Grant, and they thanked the Council for allotting the time on the agenda for this discussion. The Seed Grant has allowed the group to determine the ecological consequences during varying

severities of droughts, evaluate potential drought-response management practices to mitigate ecosystem effects during drought periods, and evaluate the long-term management actions to increase drought resilience in the basin. The study used riverweed to quantify the relationship between flow variables and riverweed biomass. Three different scenarios were analyzed and used to compare riverweed biomass including: stormwater and infiltration, Vulcan quarry releases, and low flow operations and responses. Laura concluded that they saw the greatest gains for river flows in the low flow operations scenario. By combining all three scenarios, they saw the impacts to reservoir operations minimized. They also noted that no gaps were identified in meeting water demands for all scenarios.

Discussion Summary:

A Council member noted that the Vulcan quarry release scenario is a concept that may help in flows. They asked what it would take to put the scenario into operation? Laura and Ben mentioned that Clayton County has some studies with using quarries for flow augmentation and flood storage. The streams of the Flint River are relatively small where the practice would be considered, so it cannot operate as a direct pump system, but could divert flows.

A Council member asked what the cost estimate would be for converting a quarry into flood storage. It was noted that in Athens-Clarke County, there was a \$250 million project to fund the conversion of a quarry into water storage.

Several Council members noted a number of existing quarries in the Piedmont that could be conducive for water supply but not necessarily for augmenting flows.

Council members commented that quarries could also have positive water quality impacts.

Council members mentioned that they are excited to read the upcoming reports to come from the conclusion of the Upper Basin Flows Seed Grant Project.

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 there are error bars associated with stacking different modeling methods together to estimate take. Mark answered that there is sufficient data on metering, observed impact from groundwater and surface water pumping, and bathymetry results to aid in making the best estimation possible. The objective is to make a reasonable estimation of take.

Several Council members offered positive comments about the program and were encouraged by the ongoing progress.

Better Back Roads Update

Rhonda Gordon and Julie Shutters (Golden Triangle RC&D) presented a series of updates regarding the Better Back Roads initiative developed by the Golden Triangle Resource Conservation & Development Council. The main constraint on repair and maintenance of dirt roads in the region is a lack of trained professionals who can use the requisite equipment to maintain and repair back roads. To remedy this shortage, Golden Triangle has acquired funding to purchase a classroom trailer as well as a heavy equipment simulator to train staff and other interested individuals in the region. Currently, 7 county road departments, 48 county employees, and 8 individuals other than county employees have been trained. Julie mentioned that she works one-on-one with trainees to help them understand and implement Best Management Practices. She also mentioned that this program is not only about water quantity but quality for the wildlife, communities, and ecosystems.

Agricultural Water Permitting Program Update

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.

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.

Public Comment

No public comments were made.

Adjourn

Chairman Graft thanked the Council for their discussion and participation today and adjourned the meeting.

Council Members Attending November 13, 2024 Meeting

Michael Bownes*	Jack Holbrook
Gene Brunson	Terrell Hudson
Brad Ellis	Raines Jordan
Beth English	Brandon Lewis
Adam Graft	Gordon Rogers

Other Attendees

Meagan Taylor (GWPPC)	Anna Truszczynski (GAEPD)*
Mark Masters (GWPPC)	Jennifer Welte (GAEPD)*
Sarah Skinner (GWPPC)*	Johanna Smith (GAEPD)
Megan Stanley (GWPPC)*	Laura Rack (UGA)
Clete Barton (GAEPD)	Ben Roberts (GSWCC)
Russell Nix (GAEPD)	Jim Frieze (GSWCC)
Ben Emanuel (American Rivers)	Gary Hawkins (UGA)
Julie Shutters (Golden Triangle RC&D)	Bert Early (GFC)
Rhonda Gordon (Golden Triangle RC&D)	
Clara Coarsey (Bishop/ GaGWP)	

**By videoconference*