



Meeting Summary

Suwannee-Satilla Regional Water Planning Council

Simply Southern Events

Ambrose, GA

August 7, 2025

Welcome & Introductions

Council Chairman Scott Downing called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. and thanked everyone for traveling to be in attendance. After mentioning that this council has not met since last November (2024), Downing prompted those in the room to introduce themselves. Chairman Downing noted that the Council had not seen such an attendance in a long time and that he was encouraged by the participation. He noted that he and Grady Thompson (Vice Chair) were the only original Council members present. Following those remarks, Downing introduced Mark Masters from the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center (GWPPC) to preview the meeting agenda.

Council Orientation and GWPPC Update

Mark Masters (GWPPC) introduced himself and reminded the Council that GWPPC had not yet taken over facilitation responsibilities for the Suwannee-Satilla Council when they had last met in November. He briefly explained the purpose and history of GWPPC and its current role in Regional Water Planning for the State of Georgia. He noted that GWPPC has served as the primary support team for the Lower-Flint-Ochlocknee, Upper Flint and Middle Chattahoochee Councils since regional planning began in 2009 and is enthusiastic about their new role in supporting all ten Councils across Georgia as we near the upcoming plan revision period.

In consideration of the Council having several new appointees in attendance, Mark provided a brief overview on the regional water planning process and timeline for the fourth iteration of planning scheduled to be completed in 2028. He encouraged the Council to attend their upcoming joint council meeting with Lower Flint-Ochlocknee and Altamaha Councils on September 24th, 2025 at the Museum of Agriculture in Tifton, GA. In concluding his presentation, Mark emphasized the importance of conserving our water resources through

planning and best management practices. He adds to also highlight the importance of partnership in regional water planning and with that introduces Russell Nix with the Regional Water Planning Unit (GAEPD) to provide an update on grant funding and appointments as pertains to water planning.

- Scott Downing (Chair) emphasized Mark's comment on water resources by noting that the Suwannee-Satilla is one of the few districts that contain the headwaters of their river basins. He complimented Mark (and the GWPPC), as well as GAEPD, for doing an "excellent job in providing modeling results that are way better now than when this process of water planning had initially started." He stressed to the Council that when the plan goes to be revised, that it is a long process in which opportunities for feedback from the public are taken very seriously.

GAEPD Update

Mr. Russell Nix (GAEPD) introduced himself as the manager of the new Regional Water Planning Unit and as the current GAEPD liaison for the Suwannee-Satilla Council. He further explained the contract with GWPPC, which will now be taking the lead on working with the Regional Water Planning Councils through the next plan update in 2028. Mr. Nix updated the Council on promotions within the Watershed Protection Branch including that of Dr. Anna Truszczynski being promoted to Deputy Director of GAEPD and Veronica Craw as the now Watershed Protection Branch Chief. Mr. Nix briefly mentioned that the potential appointee list has been sent to the Governor for all councils and that GAEPD has started working on the Speaker and Lt. Governor recommendation lists. Mr. Nix also gave an update on seed grants in the Suwannee-Satilla Council region. He reported that last year, two seed grants were executed; one to the University of Georgia related to education and outreach on proper septic system maintenance and management, and another to the Carl Vinson Institute for Lake Beatrice improvements and operations models research. Lastly, he announced that the FY2026 seed grant application period is now open as of July 21, 2025. All applications will be due by October 31, 2025. Following these updates from GAEPD, some Council members asked Mr. Nix questions regarding agricultural metering:

- Who is reading the agricultural meters now? Is it still the Georgia Forestry Commission?
 - Mark Masters noted that the Georgia Forestry Commission has a contract with GAEPD to read meters annually October through December. Russell Nix adds that GAEPD has hired additional staff through a grant to help with meter readings and undergo possible future training to conduct meter installations/replacements.
- If a meter is broken, is it my [landowner] responsibility to fix it? Whose responsibility is it to purchase the meter?
 - GAEPD is responsible for the physical meter repairs and replacements. Financially, for permits issued before February 2003, the state covers the cost of the meter and its

installation. For permits issued after this date, the financial responsibility is on that of the permit holder. Added remark: It is the landowner/permit holder's responsibility to notify GAEPD that a meter is broken.

Presentation on Freshwater Mussels in Southern Georgia

Dr. Steve Golladay with GWPPC field team highlighted the vast distribution of freshwater mussel species with approximately 130 out of 1000 known species being found in the state of Georgia. He commented that 70% of species are at a risk of extinction due to contributing risks to mussels including, but not limited to, dams, pollution, harvesting, hydrologic alteration, and climate change. Dr. Golladay overviewed the scientific classification, anatomy, and life cycle of freshwater mussels. He added that the benefits of mussels include being good indicators of stream health, providing food web support, enriching stream sediment, and cleaning our rivers. Dr. Golladay previewed the field teams' work under GA-FIT, which included conducting 90 mussel surveys in the Flint River basin between 2023 and 2024. He noted that these were the first basin wide surveys conducted since 2001 and have provided critical data to update mussel distribution models. To tie in the importance of mussel species' presence in our basins, Dr. Golladay introduced the Council to two listed species found in the Withlacoochee River of the Suwannee River basin: the Delicate Spike (*Elliptio arcata*) and the Suwannee Moccasinshell (*Medionidis walkeri*).

Questions:

- We have had places on Lake Blackshear where water clarity seems to be increasing, but mussel carcasses seem to be showing up increasingly, what could be causing this?
 - Two things: they do draw down the lake periodically which is faster than the mussels can move; most of the mussels in Lake Blackshear are short lived species; could also be due to intolerances of high temperatures and varying levels of dissolved oxygen.
- Are there mussels in our underground aquifers?
 - There could be, but in general mussels don't live far from the source stream due to access to food.
- Do you take volunteers for surveying, especially with local riverkeepers?
 - We don't get a lot of volunteers. There is very little public access land in the Lower Flint Basin; we are highly dependent on landowners to allow access to private property for us to conduct surveys; we have received a lot of cooperation through extensive public outreach efforts.
- Are there any non-native mussel species?
 - The Golden Basket Clam has been in Georgia since the 1960's when it came over from Asia; it has been associated with declines in native mussel populations, but not conclusive that they are displacing native mussels. Zebra mussels, native to Eurasia, are

known to cause trouble, but fortunately they do not like hot summers like we have here in Georgia.

Suwannee River Water Management Update

Hugh Thomas, Executive Director of Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD), provided a detailed presentation educating the Council on Florida's Suwannee district, how they conduct water planning, and overviewed current water related projects within the district. The SRWMD encompasses 7,640 miles containing all or parts of 15 North Florida counties and 13 river basins. Mr. Thomas explained how the district ensures current and future water availability while preserving natural resources through their Minimum Flows and Levels (MLFs) program. MLFs are typically reevaluated on a 5-year cycle in which a priority list is published for areas in need of restoration efforts. He also mentioned reliance on the North Florida-Southeast Georgia (NFSEG) model to provide data about groundwater levels across the Suwannee and neighboring districts. SWRMD water plans are based on a 20-year planning horizon with reevaluation occurring every 5 years in which any modifications are approved by the governing board. In concluding his presentation, Mr. Thomas highlighted various ongoing water conservation projects in the district including multiple cost share water saving measures, a USGS survey for preservation of Gulf Sturgeon critical habitat, and a Water First 40mgd water treatment wetland.

- Scott Downing noted that maintaining a good relationship with the Suwannee water district was in the best interest of our shared water resources.

Lunch Break

Special Presentation from Premium Peanut

Courtney Dorsett, VP of Food Safety and Sustainability at Premium Peanut, thanked the Council for inviting her team to the meeting and expressed that she is enthusiastic about the Councils' interest in their operation. Formed in 2014, with shelling operations beginning in 2016, the Douglas, GA Premium Peanut facility averages an annual operating capacity of 260,000 tons. Ms. Dorsett outlined the procedure of processing peanuts including details on cleaning, deshelling, sorting, packaging, and shipping. She mentioned the importance of irrigation to provide a healthy and sustainable peanut crop and prevent risks to crops with one of the most prominent being exposure to aflatoxin. Courtney's colleague, Chase Grantham, relayed his personal experience as a grower for Premium Peanut. She also invited her colleague Raegan Wiggins to provide a background knowledge of aflatoxin including how it is caused by drought stress, how it is regulated, and how it is tested for at Premium Peanut.

Planning Discussion

Council Chair, Scott Downing, encouraged appointees to reach out to either himself or the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center team with any suggestions of future meeting topics, names for new Council appointments, or possible new meeting locations and touring opportunities.

Public Comment

No public comment.

Adjourn

Chairman Downing thanked everyone for their attendance and participation and adjourned the meeting at 1:17pm for the tour at Premium Peanut.

Council Member Attendance

Scott Downing – Council Chair

Grady Thompson – Council Vice Chair

Appointee Attendance

Clark Coarsey

Joshua Dawson

Jake Ford
Ronnie Gaskins
Jason Holt
Jeffrey Hull
Brent James
Clay Pirkle

Other Attendees

Hugh Thomas – Suwannee River Water Management District
Courtney Dorsett – Premium Peanut
Shannon Gregory – Satilla Riverkeeper
Phillip Edwards – UGA Agriculture Water Team
Jason Mallard – UGA
Bert Earley – Georgia Forestry Commission
Raegan Wiggins – Premium Peanut
Chase Grantham – Premium Peanut/Peanut grower

Council Support

Mark Masters (GWPPC)
Megan Stanley (GWPPC)
Clete Barton (GAEPD)
Timothy Fields (GAEPD)
Parris Maguire (GAEPD)
Russell Nix (GAEPD)