Memorandum

To: Upper Oconee Regional Water Planning Council

From: Dr. Gail Cowie (GWPPC)

Date: October 26, 2026

Subject: Upper Oconee Council (UOC) Meeting Summary
(subject to Council review and approval)

This memorandum provides the meeting summary of the Upper Oconee Regional Water Planning Council Meeting, held in person at Putnam County Administration Building, Room 203, 117 Putnam Drive, Eatonton, GA 31024 on March 23, 2026 from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM.

1. Welcome and Council Business – Hunter Bicknell (Council Chair)

Chair Bicknell called the meeting to order at 10:00 AM and welcomed the Council and other attendees. The Chair asked for motions and seconds to approve the March 14, 2025 draft Meeting Summary, the October 8, 2025 draft Meeting Summary, and the March 23, 2026 Meeting Agenda. Motions were made and seconded; all were approved without dissent. Chair Bicknell welcomed the visitors in the gallery. At the Chair's request, Dr. Gail Cowie gave a short overview of regional water planning and the purpose of the Council.

2. EPD Updates – Brian Kent (EPD Liaison to the Council)

Mr. Kent described the two Regional Water Plan Implementation Seed Grants awarded to applicants in the Upper Oconee Region:

- Trail Creek Flood Resistance and Watershed Data Pilot awarded to Athens-Clarke County Unified Government
  (10/26/2026 note: This proposal was withdrawn by the Athens-Clarke County Unified Government during the post-award contracting process.)
- Advancing Instream Flow Evaluation in Water Planning awarded to UGA River Basin Center

A Council member asked if there was more seed grant money available. Mr. Kent replied that there was not more money available at that time; the next round of funding would be available in the fall, with grant submission expected to open during the summer.

Mr. Kent then gave an update from the State Water Council, which met on December 8, 2025 and approved changes in the Section 14 of the State Water Plan as proposed in September 2025. The changes altered the number and composition of the Regional Water Planning Councils and increased the length of their terms. The changes will take effect if approved by the

General Assembly and signed by the Governor.
(10/26/2026 note: The changes were approved and took effect after the 2026 legislative session.)

3. Regional Water Planning Webinar - Dr. Gail Cowie (Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center)

Dr. Cowie announced a Regional Water Planning webinar titled *Data Center Development from a Water Perspective*, scheduled for March 30. Recordings of the six Regional Water Planning webinars are available on the state water planning website: https://waterplanning.georgia.gov/water-planning/council-webinar-series.

4. GAWP and GRWA Activities in the Region – Jennifer Flowers (Georgia Association of Water Professionals) and Jay Matthews (Georgia Rural Water Association)

Jennifer Flowers with GAWP gave a short presentation on her organization's activities in the Upper Oconee Water Planning Region. Ms. Flowers noted that GAWP and GWRA are independent organizations that complement each other well. Fostering industry collaboration and engagement is an important focus for GAWP. GAWP operates through 38 standing committees that involve water professionals from the around the state in development of technical guidance documents. They hold district meetings in eight districts, with participation from managers and operators of local water and wastewater facilities. One of GAWP's most important roles is providing trainings and conferences that support certification of facility operators and development of critical skills among contractors that assist water and wastewater utilities.

Jay Matthews with GWRA described his organization's service to water professionals working in smaller communities across Georgia (population below 10,000 people). GWRA offers training and technical assistance on a range of topics in on-site in-person, virtual, and online formats. They support emergency response, including provision of generators for emergency power and bypass pumps. They also organize two conferences as year that serve water and wastewater operators, local government staff and managers, and elected officials. The focus is on preventing problems from occurring or addressing them before they become dire like during drought. Mr. Matthews also emphasized the coordination between GAWP and GRWA.

There was considerable discussion after the presentations:

- Q: What is the cost to an individual that GRWA helps? A: There is no cost, it is funded from other sources.
- Q: Does that apply to private systems? A: Any permitted utility can receive help
- Q: What kind of regulations do neighborhoods with community wells have to meet? A: Those systems have to meet same regulations as a typical water system when there are 15 connections or a population of 25 people or more.

- Q: Is there any published data on water usage from data centers? A: It is being monitored, but we don't have good data yet. Mr. Matthews suggested that local officials should make sure their systems can serve the current population before approving data centers. Ms. Flowers noted that experience has shown that data centers will come in requesting an amount of water and if they are told that much water is not available, the developers will come back with a lower number.
- Comments: There are data centers in Arizona that are not using water for cooling or are providing their own water.
- Q: Some local water providers are proactively giving conservation requirements before allowing a data center to come in. Can all water providers do this? A: More and more local governments are putting requirements on data centers. It is a negotiation process.
- Comment: All local governments all should do so.
- Comment: There are a lot of challenges on the electrical component of data centers. Alternative energy backups will be an issue and there's some talk of diesel and nuclear power.
- Q: Are there any other critical issues on the horizon? A: Emerging contaminants (PFAS particularly); regulation of nitrogen in water treatment; and increased regulation to decrease phosphorus in wastewater discharges. It would be good to focus some education on nitrogen runoff, which is important for the Upper Oconee Council due to the impacts of nutrient runoff on Lake Oconee and Sinclair (algal blooms, taste and odor problems). Management of nutrient loading was highlighted as a priority in the 2023 Upper Oconee Regional Water Plan.
- Q: How can we better connect people who work on the water plans and those who implement them? A: Unfortunately, we don't see a lot of utilities participating in the water planning process. GAWP is encouraging and promoting utilities to participate more.
- Comment: Some utilities haven't been invited to participate. We should make a point to invite them.
- Q: As the councils work on revision of management practices for the next plan update, is there anything else that jumps out as having changed in the last 10 years? A: Water audits and metering is much better and more accurate now.
- How do best management practices align between the Regional Water Plan, GWRA, and GAWP? A: They are similar, but the practices have to be scaled to size and capacity of different communities or utilities (small, mid-sized, and large).

5. Upper Oconee Implementation Assessment update – Dr. Laura Rack (Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center)

Dr. Rack gave an overview of the draft Implementation Assessment for the Upper Oconee Region. It focuses on projects that have leveraged state and federal funding sources to implement water projects in the region from 2020-2025. The objectives are to provide the Councils, GAEPD, and stakeholders with information about:

- Water-related projects that support implementation of the Plan's management practices

- Progress in implementing and supporting the regional water planning process
- Implementation highlights
- Council priorities for the next plan update

The document summarizes project funding sources and the management practices addressed by categories of projects. It also includes an implementation highlight for the region. Dr. Rack will revise the draft based on feedback from the Council. Chair Bicknell called for volunteers to join him on a review committee. Jennifer Scott, Charles Armentrout, Pat Graham, Chris Yancey, and Bill Sharp signed up.

6. Council Priorities Discussion (Part 1) - Dr. Gail Cowie (Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center)

Dr. Cowie started the priorities discussion by setting the stage for the 2028 update of the regional water plan. She reviewed the process for updating the water plan and reminded Council members that management practices were not updated during the 2023 plan due to the number of vacant seats on the Council. Dr. Cowie asked council members to reflect on the current state of the region and waterscape individually. Each council member received a worksheet with three questions:

- Over the past 10–15 years, what are the most important changes you've observed in the management of water supply and water quality in this region?
- When you think about the Upper Oconee region 20 years from now, what does "success" look like for our water resources?
- What water-related issues will have the greatest influence on the region's ability to grow and thrive over the next five to ten years?

Council members were then asked to turn to their neighbor and discuss their responses. After about 15 minutes of paired discussion, the full council came together to share similarities or new ideas with the full group.

Council members highlighted these changes over the past 10-15 years:

- Cooperation to address environmental concerns and collaboration amongst utilities have both increased
- The landscape has transitioned from more rural to more urban
- There are still challenges with accountability, such as metering and submetering, and in customers or water users understanding the real cost of water and distribution.
- Public education is important and still needed around water and wastewater
- Water quality concerns in the region are more significant in the northern end of the basin
- It will be important in the future to change with technology – in the past, uptake of new technology has sometimes been slow
- Continuing to work towards sustainable practices

Council members noted that following as issues that will have the greatest influence in coming years:

- Emerging contaminants, PFAS in particular
- Changes in demands or usage requests, like data centers
- Changes in technology – new water treatment plants are being built on a smaller footprint
- Use of quarries for water storage
- Changes in water usage due to conservation pricing
- A need to protect water sources from attack or contamination

There was a break for lunch from 11:55 to 12:45.

7. Council Priorities Discussion (Part 2) – Dr. Laura Rack (Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center)

Dr. Laura Rack started Part 2 of the Council Priorities Discussion by transitioning the focus from the state of the region and waterscape to identifying priorities for the 2028 plan update. Council members were divided into three groups, with four council members each, to discuss the following in the context of the regional water plan update: (1) What they want to see more of, (2) What they want to see less of, and (3) What should be done differently. After each group recorded their answers on a large poster, council members took a gallery walk, viewed answers from other groups, and returned for a full group discussion.

Council members noted some common themes among the groups:

- All groups brought up the need for more education – both for water users and communication with water professionals. The Plan's Executive Summary or some snapshot of the Plan should be used as an education tool with groups like water professionals to foster more interaction. Other suggestions included having a regional water planning booth at conferences hosted by Georgia Municipal Association and the Association County Commissioners of Georgia and including regional water planning in the trainings offered by both of those local government associations. A council member emphasized the need for state support – e.g., funding – to execute the plan and improve education and outreach.
- How to engage people in the region and the entities that implement the plan. Council members discussed how to promote participation in Council meetings, help people get them familiar with the plans, and support implement of management practices. The need for education and training at the operator and management level of utilities was noted by Council members. Other regional water planning councils have seen successful engagement when council members acted as ambassadors and intentionally inviting people from local utilities to meetings. Council members would like to engage with other councils in joint meetings that support shared learning.

The council discussed the extent to which local utilities are using the regional water plan and how that could be tracked. Dr. Rack noted that the Implementation Assessment will provide some content for this question. A Council member noted that bond funding for utilities may be greater than state and federal funds; this is a gap in the implementation assessment.

It was difficult for council members to answer what they want to see less of – some council members are new and are still learning the region.

In response to what they would like to see different, council members noted the following:

- More engagement across the region – potentially through the regional commissions
- A way to get more feedback from utility providers before the next draft of the plan is finalized – they implement the plans and often guide elected officials
- Streamlining the management practices – the last plan had 35 and this must be an overwhelming number for the implementing actors

Dr. Gail Cowie closed out the discussion by letting the council know that this discussion would provide a springboard for future discussion on the plan update. She also directed council members to the vision and goals, which will be discussed at the next meeting. Dr. Cowie asked if there was any feedback at this time on the vision and goals. Chair Bicknell asked Council members to send feedback in the coming weeks if they had suggestions for changes.

8. Public Comment – Chair Hunter Bicknell

Dr. Cowie shared two public comments that were submitted in written form about the proposed rock quarry in Putnam County. Copies were passed to council members, and a digital version will be made available to council members.

Chair Bicknell asked if there were any public comments from local elected officials or members of the public. No one responded.

9. Wrap-up and Adjourn

Chair Bicknell adjourned the meeting at 1:55 PM.

Meeting Attendance

Council Members

- Hunter Bicknell (Chair)
- Stuart Cofer (Vice-Chair)
- Pat Graham
- David Keener
- Charles Armentrout
- Linda Blechinger
- Mark Saxon
- Jim Dove
- Rabun Neal
- Jennifer Scott
- Bill Sharp
- Chris Yancey

Georgia EPD Staff

- Clete Barton
- Russell Nix
- Tim Fields
- Parris McGuire

Public Attendees and Agency Partners

- Virginia Thom, Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA)
- Jennifer Flowers, Georgia Association of Water Professionals
- Jay Matthews, Georgia Rural Water Association
- Britt Davis (for Lennie Brame), Georgia Power
- Courtney Stevenson, local environmental
- Alex Smith, Middle Georgia Regional Commission
- Bill Webster, visitor, Putman County
- Scott Thackston, Georgia Forestry Commission
- Steve Hersey, Putnam Commission
- Miriam Hatcher, Stop the Rock Quarry – Putnam County
- Catherine H. Siewick

Planning Contractors

- Gail Cowie, Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center
- Laura Rack, Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center
- Caitlin Sweeney, Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center