

Survey of Opinions of Alabama Citizens Related to Water Resources and Water Policy and Law

The Auburn University Water Resources Center, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Butler-Cunningham Endowment, and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management jointly commissioned a public opinion survey from the Center for Governmental Services at Auburn University, in January, 2009. The study assessed Alabamians' perceptions and attitudes about water resources and to obtain public opinions about policy issues related to the management, conservation and enhancement of these resources. A random sample of 10,000 Alabama residents was used to contact 2,148 individuals by phone, and accordingly, 412 residents completed the lengthy questionnaire.

This research examined the dynamics among Alabama citizens, government relations and environmental resources. It identified citizens' current knowledge, thoughts and concerns as it relates to Alabama's natural resources. Forty-one percent of respondents were concerned about water-related problems in their communities and 67% believed there will be some kind of water problem in Alabama in the next decade. The most important water-related problems that Alabamians anticipate are water shortages and water pollution. Forty-two percent of survey respondents reported talking with their relatives, friends or neighbors about water shortage problems in the past two years and over one-third have been subject to water restrictions.

Understanding how Alabamians use water and where their water originates from was a major focus of the research project. One-third of survey respondents did not try to monitor how much water they used in their households and over half could not estimate the amount of water they used on a monthly basis. In addition to using water for normal household purposes, 61% of Alabamians water their lawns and gardens and 72% receive their water from municipal water supply systems.

Alabamians were very much concerned about the severe drought of 2006-07 and 40% of survey respondents had experienced direct negative effects on their personal lives as a result of the drought. Twenty-six percent said their lawn or garden suffered and 28% said they endured water shortages/restrictions. A majority of survey respondents recognized that less water is available during the summer and during drought years for many reasons; however, they thought that the drought was particularly severe during 2007 because it lasted longer and rainfall was less.

How to address the challenges of water resource management, especially during periods of below average rain fall, is a major topic of public debate. Most Alabamians want to see improvements in Alabama's water policy or enforcement. Fifty-two percent of survey respondents said that Alabama's water policy and laws are inadequate or need modest improvements. Twenty-six percent indicated that enforcement of water policy laws is lacking.

As a solution to Alabama's water problems, the largest proportion of survey respondents (35%) favored the implementation of more aggressive conservation practices. For the most part, Alabamians supported the proposed conservation policy of charging individuals and companies higher rates for water when they use more than the normal amount. Over 80% of Alabamians agree that laws and regulations should be developed to reward water Conservation.

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