

At the Headwaters for Sustainable Water Management in Alabama: A Look at Lessons Learned and Future Opportunities

It is impossible to overstate the importance of water to the economy and the environment of Alabama. The prominence of Alabama's rivers on the state seal underscores the value that water has always had here. With the recent drought finally over, many will feel a temptation to return to business as usual and wait for the next water shortage to take action on sustainable water management. However, the time is now to create lasting water management strategies that will accommodate future growth, protect Alabama's wealth of aquatic diversity, and allow the state to weather future natural variations in rainfall.

Fortunately, Alabama has already taken the first steps towards updating its water management regime. The Permanent Joint Legislative Committee on Water Policy and Management is entering its second year of existence and is poised to offer legislative changes that will improve Alabama's existing riparian system of water management. Changes that should be considered include re-evaluating the Office of Water Resources' administration of water withdrawals in the state; regulating the transfers of water between river basins; evaluating the environmental impacts of reservoirs and groundwater depletion; and enacting incentives for water conservation and efficiency regardless of drought conditions.

This presentation will outline the suite of water management options for Alabama through the lens of other state systems, particularly neighboring Georgia. Georgia has had a regulated riparian system in place since the 1970s and passed its first statewide water plan in 2008. It also flirted briefly with introducing water markets in 2003, an idea that was wisely rejected by the legislature. While Georgia has ostensibly made some forward progress, there are many lessons to be learned in examining the strengths and weaknesses of its water policy (or, some would say, the absence thereof).

With litigation over shared river systems continuing against both Georgia and Florida, the time is now to take decisive action in Alabama to set us on a path to sustainable water supply for future generations. We can no longer afford to make decisions only when there is a crisis. This presentation will provide recommendations for water management policy in Alabama that will harmonize economic and environmental prosperity and ensure that the state's waterways remain viable public resources supporting a myriad of uses.

Presenter and author:

Gil Rogers

grogers@selcga.org

Southern Environmental Law Center