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WATER AND AGRICULTURE IN GEORGIA

Report Highlights Trends, Opportunities to Avoid Water Wars

ATHENS, GA (November 8, 2017)—Georgia grown goods and products clothe and feed people far beyond the state’s borders. The value of the state’s agricultural products, including peanuts, corn, cotton, timber, meat, milk and eggs is more than \$14 billion. Georgia’s farmers, producers and growers work hard in dynamic environmental, financial and regulatory conditions to deliver these food and fiber commodities to the global supply chain. Their jobs would be impossible without water and this makes wise use and management of water resources all the more important.

The [Georgia Water Coalition’s](#) new report—*Watering Georgia: The State of Water and Agriculture in Georgia*—highlights the history and economics of irrigated agriculture. The report explains how the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) issues and regulates 24,000 agricultural water withdrawal permits across the state.

Using EPD-generated data, *Watering Georgia* identifies technological, water source and geographic trends in agriculture water use. For example, the report reveals that irrigated agriculture is growing fastest along Georgia’s coast and in the Ogeechee River basin. Without appropriate management, these regions could feel future stress on groundwater supplies as more irrigation operations come online.

***Watering Georgia* also addresses the decades long “water wars.” In the [Florida v. Georgia](#) trial now before the U.S. Supreme Court, the state of Florida accused Georgia’s farmers, producers and growers of illegally irrigating tens-of-thousands of acres of farmland. In response, EPD began issuing notices of violation to landowners and permit holders alleged to be violating the terms of their permits.**

Under the cloud of litigation, Georgia’s Governor Nathan Deal created an Agricultural Permitting Compliance Task Force in late 2016 to pave a regulatory and compliance path forward. As *Watering Georgia* details, the Task Force’s recommendations have not been publically announced in their entirety, but may include specific changes to permitting, metering, compliance and institutional budgeting.

The Task Force's initial review indicates there may be more than 700 undocumented withdrawal permits statewide. Approximately 25,000 acres in the Flint River basin could be affected by unpermitted irrigation or permittees not complying with existing permit conditions. Additionally, more than 12,000 permits—or 52 percent statewide—lack a water use meter that is supposed to be provided and paid for by the state of Georgia.

The first public action taken in response to the Task Force's work occurred when the Governor's office announced in June 2017 a plan to invest \$10.5 million from the One Georgia Authority into EPD's oversight of the state agricultural metering program, which included the appointment of a new Agricultural Water Project Manager. EPD is currently focusing on ensuring water use meters are installed for permitted withdrawals in the heavily used Flint and Suwannee river basins.

Watering Georgia makes a number of technological and policy recommendations. The report documents a positive trend of installing more efficient irrigation systems: Between 2010 and 2015 in the lower Flint River basin, the number of inefficient irrigation systems declined by 37 percent, and the use of more efficient systems increased by 30 percent. Dedicated farmers, growers and producers can be good stewards, and stewardship comes with a cost: A retrofit of an existing center pivot watering 160 acres could cost \$8,000, and a new system could range in cost between \$100,000 and \$150,000. Other soil-moisture sensor and "variable rate irrigation" computerized software packages can add at least \$10,000 to the ledger.

Among the policy recommendations in the report is a need to collect more reliable and relevant data on water withdrawals and use. Additionally, better information that correlates the amount of water actually applied to crops with the final yield achieved will help inform how many inches of water are necessary for economically viable commodity production.

"We should learn from the experience of water management in the Flint River basin, and not repeat the same mistakes in the other basins, particularly those in areas that are only now experiencing explosive growth in the installation of irrigation equipment," said Gordon Rogers, Flint Riverkeeper.

"The Special Master's recommendation to the Supreme Court can be a 'win' for Georgia only if the state meaningfully addresses its obvious liability in agricultural water use management," said Chris Manganiello, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper Water Policy Director. "It's up to all of us to use water wisely."

The full report is online: <https://www.gawater.org/watering-georgia-report>

About Georgia Water Coalition:

The [Georgia Water Coalition's](#) mission is to protect and care for Georgia's surface and groundwater resources, which are essential for sustaining economic prosperity, providing clean and abundant drinking water, preserving diverse aquatic habitats for wildlife and recreation, strengthening property values, and protecting the quality of life for current and future generations.

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