

2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



FLORIDAN AQUIFER

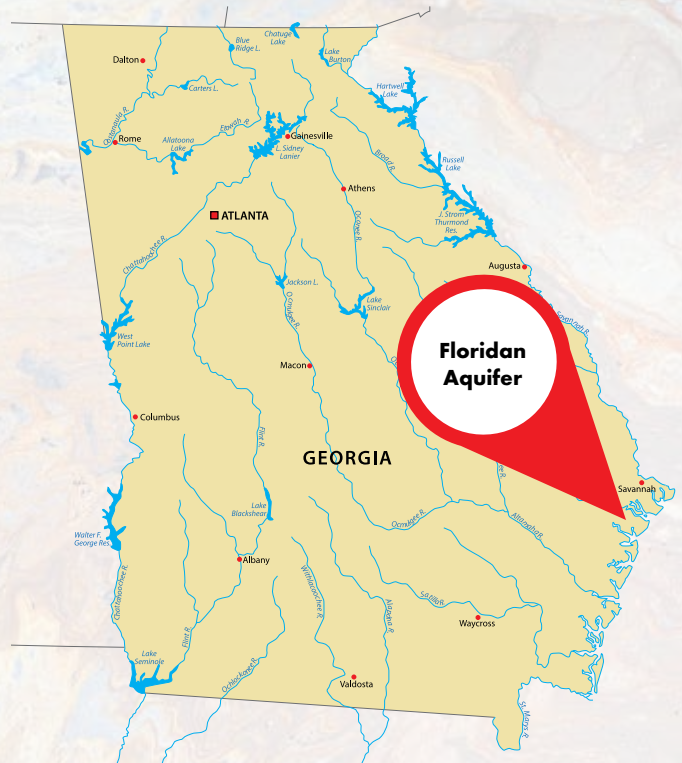
Growth in Coastal Counties Stresses Fragile Water Supply

INTRODUCTION

Metro Atlanta has long been Georgia's poster child for out-of-control and poorly managed growth, and the region's unbridled thirst for water sparked a more than three-decade water conflict with neighboring states over the use of the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers. Today, Georgia's water conflicts have gone coastal. With growth fueled by the expansion of the Port of Savannah, residents and leaders in Chatham, Bryan, Effingham, Liberty and Bulloch counties are now wrangling with one another over access to water. In December of last year, some 120 Bulloch County residents crowded a public meeting to express their opposition to a plan that would send water from Bulloch County wells into neighboring Bryan County to support the massive Hyundai Electric Vehicle plant and associated development. The proposed wells lie just over the Bulloch-Bryan county line and outside a four-county area surrounding Savannah in which the state has limited withdrawals from the Floridan Aquifer due to saltwater intrusion in the underground supply. As one attendee at the December meeting noted, the underground aquifer doesn't stop at the county line, nor do impacts from new water pumps. With residents, farmers and industries all having a straw in the same limited drink, more conflicts are sure to arise as the region surrounding the booming port continues to expand.

THE WATER BODY

Spanning some 100,000 square miles covering all of Florida and portions of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, the Floridan Aquifer is considered one of the most productive aquifer systems in the world. The system provides drinking water for more than 10 million people in the region, including virtually all of South Georgia with the biggest single user being the City of Savannah. When it comes to economic development in South Georgia over the past 75 years, the aquifer has been the driving force as total withdrawals have quintupled since 1950. This increase has taken its toll. Decreased head pressure from the aquifer has resulted in saltwater intrusion on the coast and a marked decrease in flows from the aquifer's famous springs that dot Florida, Georgia and Alabama, in some instances drying up not only springs but entire creeks. By comparison, when Savannah first tapped the aquifer in 1887, pressure in the system was such that the artesian wells pushed water 40 feet above ground level without the aid of pumps.



Bryan County's plan to drill four new wells in neighboring Bulloch County has angered local residents concerned about the impact on their private wells. Meanwhile, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division has encouraged local governments to develop surface water sources to ease pressure on scarce groundwater supplies. The nearby Ogeechee River could be a potential water source.

THE DIRT

The Floridan aquifer is under stress. Saltwater was first noted creeping into the underground supply of Hilton Head Island in the late 1900s. The plume of saltwater is steadily moving toward Savannah, threatening the region's primary water source. In 2008, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) capped withdrawals from the aquifer in Chatham, Bryan, Liberty and a portion of Effingham counties at 2004 levels and in 2013 extended a moratorium on new withdrawals to include both the Upper and Lower Floridan aquifers. Bryan County, for one, has reached the limit of its state-issued water withdrawal permit capacity.

Excluding aggressive water conservation measures, the caps leave local leaders with only more expensive options for new water supplies: constructing desalination systems, tapping untested and less productive aquifers or accessing surface water from local rivers or streams.



With withdrawals from the Floridan Aquifer restricted in Bryan County, providing water for the massive Hyundai electric vehicle plant and associated development has proven difficult. Bryan County leaders have opted to tap the aquifer in neighboring Bulloch County just outside the boundary governing restrictions on the Floridan. Local residents have raised concerns about the new wells impacting production for nearby domestic and agricultural wells.



With population growth and development fueled by the expansion of the Port of Savannah, residents and leaders in Chatham, Bryan, Effingham, Liberty and Bulloch counties are now wrangling with one another over access to water. Since 2004, the communities surrounding Savannah have seen their withdrawals from the Floridan Aquifer capped due to saltwater intrusion into the underground water source.

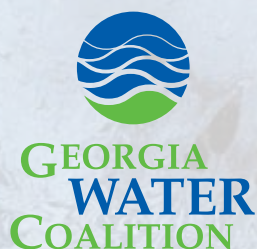
WHAT MUST BE DONE

With growth spawned by the Port of Savannah not likely to slow, water demands will only escalate. Local and state leaders must initiate regional water planning that will protect the Floridan aquifer from saltwater intrusion, limit groundwater transfers into water-restricted jurisdictions, initiate meaningful water efficiency and conservation measures and secure water sources for a sustainable future. Unlike existing regional water plans which provide only guidance, future plans must be enforceable and local governments must adhere to the plan.

Bryan County leaders' solution, however, has been to simply tap the aquifer just outside the boundary of the moratorium and transfer it into their water-limited area. The seven-million gallon a day suck from the Floridan aquifer needed to meet demands of the Hyundai plant and associated development will only threaten nearby domestic and agricultural wells while increasing the likelihood of more saltwater intrusion.

Indeed, in issuing a draft permit for the four proposed Bulloch County wells, EPD strongly encouraged Bryan and Bulloch counties to cooperatively identify and access surface water sources rather than placing further stress on groundwater supplies.

The conflict even worked its way into the Georgia General Assembly this session, as the legislature passed a controversial measure that will allow a private water supplier with existing permit capacity to provide water to Bryan County residential developments—a move that undermines local water and sewer planning.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Ben Kirsch, *Legal Director at Ogeechee Riverkeeper*,
866-942-6222, ben@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org