

Don't favor Atlanta, advocates tell water council

Coastal concerns include desalination, aquifer storage and recovery.

Mary Landers
(912) 652-0337
mary.land@savannahnow.com

Georgia's population is increasing. Its water supply is not.

That's the problem facing the Georgia Water Council as it tries to create a statewide water plan.

"Demand is going to outpace the limited supply we have, particularly if we manage that supply in the ways we have in the past," said Carol Couch, director of the state Environmental Protection Division.

Couch is also chair of the Georgia Water Council, which brought the last of its four recent town hall meetings to the Coastal Georgia Center in Savannah Thursday. More than 70 people attended.

Much of the public comment alluded to the growth of Atlanta, a big city built on a small stream.

Coastal residents who have fought their own regional battles to ensure a safe supply of water from the aquifer and the Savannah River don't want to fend off a thirsty capital.

But they see signs it could happen.

Aquifer storage and recovery, a controversial practice in which treated water is injected into aquifers, is discussed in the statewide plan despite Georgia's moratorium on the practice.

Carl Hall of Vidalia urged intensive research before the practice is used in coastal Georgia.

"Do not risk contamination of a critical drinking water source," said Hall, a lifelong hunter and fisherman who is a board member of the Georgia Wildlife Federation.

Desalination is on the council's agenda, too. A legislatively-created study committee is already looking at the issue of turning seawater into drinking water.

The benefit for Atlanta would come from freeing up other fresh water sources, such as the Savannah River, for its use if the coast relied on desalinated ocean water.

David Kyler, executive director of the St. Simons Island-based nonprofit Center for a Sustainable Coast, opposes desalination as too energy intensive.

"Until we have environmentally responsible sources of power, desalination will be simply unsustainable," he said.

Interbasin transfer, where water from one river or aquifer is transported to another area was also criticized. It's another policy that been suggested to slake Atlanta's thirst.

Patty McIntosh, vice president of the Georgia Conservancy, urged the council to allow interbasin transfer on "rare or narrowly defined situations."

Activists have charged that four meetings the Georgia Water Council held were too few to guarantee adequate citizen participation. Couch indicated that more meetings are planned for January and May 2007 and that the council is looking to build additional meetings into its schedule.

"There isn't a Georgian who isn't a stakeholder in this process," Couch said. "Water is the lifeblood of our economy and of our quality of life."

EPD has to present a plan to the council by July 1, 2007. The council, a coordinating committee legislatively created in 2004, will then review and modify that plan, if necessary, and send a proposed plan to the General Assembly for its consideration in 2008.

State Rep. Tom Bordeaux, D-Savannah, empathized with the task in front of council members, but cautioned them.

"In my experience, when things get to the legislature, science and common sense don't matter," he said. "For water, it must be different."

"For the sake of my children and yours and everyone, come out with recommendations based on science and common sense and based on the long term, not based on the next election.