

EDITORIAL *Mississippi Needs Statewide Management Plan to Safeguard Water Resources*



By George Hopper

Director, Mississippi Water Resources Research Institute
Director, Forest and Wildlife Research Center
Dean, College of Forest Resources

In October, President Bush approved the Great Lakes Compact banning diversions of water to places outside of the region. The region includes eight states and two Canadian provinces. In short, the bountiful supply of water in the Great Lakes will stay, at least for now, in the Great Lakes region of North America.

The pact was precipitated when a Canadian business owner proposed to ship tankers full of Lake Superior's water to Asia. Since 1989, the eight governors in the region have been working on the compact to protect the world's largest freshwater system.

A little closer to home, the Georgia Legislature has introduced bills to move their state border northward in order to access the water supplies of the Tennessee River. The 50-square-mile acquisition is based on a 182-year-old claim that the original survey lines were incorrect.

Meanwhile, the 18-year-old water war between Georgia, Alabama and Florida will soon be decided in court. The dispute over Lake Lanier's water has raged since Alabama filed the first federal suit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. At the heart of the suit is control of metro Atlanta's usage of water from Lanier.

It seems that water supply issues are in the news more and more. While Mississippi is blessed with water on three sides and

plentiful supplies of ground water, we must be proactive in protecting our water supply and also our water quality.

Plentiful, clean water is essential to our quality of life. We need to protect it for future generations and ensure that as new development occurs in the state, water use is factored into the decision for planned growth.

Currently the state uses 2.5 billion gallons of water a day, and this number increases daily. Eighty percent of this water comes from Mississippi's 18 major aquifers.

Regions must protect the supply by looking at their needs — both short term and long term. For example, the new Toyota plant in northeast Mississippi has been projected to use about 1 million gallons of water daily. Twenty years ago, Tupelo stopped using ground water and switched to surface water provided by the Tombigbee, which will also supply Toyota. This long-term approach by Tupelo has paid off and has protected ground water supplies for the future.

Similarly, in 1989, the Yazoo Mississippi Delta Joint Water Management District was created to address water concerns in the Delta. The large demand on the region's water supplies has resulted in a decline in the alluvial aquifer. The water management district has been proactively seeking ways to balance water supplies with water demand, while improving and protecting surface water quality.

Just as Tupelo and the Delta region have done, we as a state need to develop a comprehensive statewide water management plan to set guidelines for now and the future. While this may be difficult, with the thousands of rural water associations spread across the state, it is important.

Also, as new development comes to the state, we should actively seek ways to conserve our water supplies and consider the development of new surface water supplies. For example, Mississippi has abundant resources for the production of renewable bio-energy fuels. The Renewable Fuels Association has estimated that 3 gallons of water are used to produce 1 gallon of ethanol. While we are all aware that as a nation we must reduce our dependency on foreign oil, we should also consider water usage and limited water supplies, and then we must plan accordingly.

The Mississippi Water Resources Research Institute is committed to working with other state officials to develop a plan. The institute was established in 1964 as a federal and state research unit and in 1983, the Mississippi Legislature formally designated it as a state research institute.

Water is a resource we often take for granted as if there is no tomorrow. However, tomorrow is now here, and we must treat our water resources with a conservation-minded eye to the future.