

THE FORMATION OF A WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

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Delta Council

The efforts to establish a water management district in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta in Northwest Mississippi have been a joint effort of Delta Council and the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, in particular Bob Hutson, Director of Environmental Resources for Farm Bureau. We have depended on the technical support provided by Jimmy Palmer of the Department of Natural Resources, and Charlie Branch and Marion Stewart of the Bureau of Land and Water Resources.

In 1978, Northwest Mississippi leaders recognized that the Delta's groundwater resources for agricultural and industrial purposes needed to be monitored to determine the relationship between the level of recharge and drawdown on our alluvial aquifer. The alluvial aquifer is our shallow aquifer unique to the Delta. At that time, rice acreage was increasing, catfish pond acreage was increasing, and irrigation of row crops was becoming more widespread. A request was made by Farm Bureau and Delta Council to the Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Geological Survey for a comprehensive study to be conducted throughout the Delta on this alluvial aquifer.

In 1983, the results of this study were presented to Governor William Winter, who called on the legislature to establish the Mississippi Water Management Council which consisted of 32 members from across the State. After 18 months of deliberations, this council presented its findings which resulted in the adoption of House Bill 762 which became known as the Omnibus Water Bill and House Bill 149, the enabling legislation which allows two or more political entities to join together to form a joint water management district for the purpose of management and conservation of a region's water resources.

Immediately, Delta Council and Farm Bureau set up a series of regional meetings, five to be exact, in the Delta to discuss the formation of a district in the Delta. These meetings attracted more than 750 people including members of the Boards of Supervisors, Soil Conservation Districts, members of both Delta Council and Farm Bureau, manufacturers, municipal officials, and civic leaders.

A common resolution was adopted at these meetings which called for Delta Council to develop a formal resolution and charter for the formation of a water management district in the Delta which would be presented to the Boards of Supervisors of the 18 Delta and part Delta Counties.

Upon completion of the charter and resolution, the Delta Council staff produced a slide tape presentation designed to be shown to the Boards of Supervisors in the 18 Delta and part Delta Counties.

I would now like to show this slide presentation.

(SLIDE PRESENTATION)

In developing a charter for a water management district, several decisions must be made. One concerns representation and the second concerns the tax levy which is used solely for the operation of the district.

First is the representation, which is detailed in House Bill 149 in 51-8-21. It states that the powers of the district shall be vested in a

board of commissioners either elected by the electors of the governmental units or appointed by the governing body or bodies of the local units. In the case of the Delta, this is the Board of Supervisors. The slide presentation pointed out that the members of the Board of Commissioners are to be elected, one per county.

Early this month [March 1988], we were advised by Department of Natural Resources staff, who have been working with the Attorney General's Office, that the Commissioners probably should be appointed by the Board of Supervisors rather than elected. There was a question of preclearance from the Justice Department concerning the Voting Rights Act and it was felt that, in order to avoid possible litigation for the district at some future time, that the commissioners be appointed.

The second decision which must be made concerning the charter is the tax levy. The law, in 51-8-43, states that a district may levy up to two mills to fund the operating costs of the district. Let me emphasize that any capital improvements are to be funded through the district's bonding authority. The tax levy is to fund only the operating costs of the district. In the beginning stages of our efforts, we were asked, "What is this going to cost us?" We did not have an answer so we asked the Bureau of Land and Water Resources. Marion Stewart of the BLWR staff worked up a tentative budget reflecting what the district should look like when fully staffed. He based his tentative budget and staffing upon successful water management districts in other states and equipment and staff costs incurred by state government agencies. We then had an estimate of \$460,000 at year 5. We then worked up a projected revenue analysis based upon the combined levee districts in the Delta and came up with 3/4 of a mill as the amount required in the charter. The Mississippi Research and Development Center was most helpful during this phase.

We next, in the summer of 1987, scheduled a series of regional meetings designed to inform and educate. These meetings were held in Rolling Fork, Yazoo City, Greenwood, Stoneville, Clarksdale, Sledge, Walls, and Senatobia. Those invited to these regional meetings were Farm Bureau and Delta Council leaders, manufacturers, municipal officials and the attorneys for the Boards of Supervisors. Many members of the Boards of Supervisors attended these meetings also.

In September, we began meeting with the individual Boards of Supervisors. As of today, we have met with all the Boards in the 18 Delta and part Delta Counties.

At present, 15 of the 18 have adopted the resolution and charter, three have the matter under advisement, and one county has rescinded its earlier action.

Washington County has expressed concerns over representation and bonding authority of the district and is currently in the process of drawing up changes to the charter and resolution which will be presented to the counties within the next two weeks from what we understand. This represents an effort among the counties to reach a compromise on the charter and resolution which would be acceptable to Washington County and the other 17 counties in the Mississippi Delta.