

# WATER RESOURCES PLANNING IN MISSISSIPPI - A STATUS REPORT

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In the field of water resources regulation and management, "planning" embraces a very wide spectrum of specific issues related to the availability, condition, use, and protection of the surface water and ground water that people - and all our sundry activities - depend upon. While the issues touched in the planning process are diverse and numerous, there ultimately are two basic questions which we in Mississippi must face in responding to the legislative mandate to prepare a Statewide Water Resources Management Plan: (1) what will this plan address; and (2) who and how will the plan be produced? For perspective, we should take a brief glimpse of fairly recent history.

Prior to approximately 1970, water resources planning, especially at the federal level, was essentially an "everyone for himself" business. The Corps of Engineers, Soil Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other large agencies involved in the general field of water and related land resources development each had extensive planning programs within the confines of their jurisdiction. The obvious overlap, redundancy, and wholesale lack of coordination among federal agencies ultimately led Congress to attempt to bring some order out of the chaos through passage of the Water Resources Planning Act, which literally forced "collective bargaining" among the major federal agencies having some statutory role in the water resources business. While this cabinet level effort rolled along for a few short years, it then foundered when the involved agencies agreed (apparently with considerable reluctance) upon a unified set of water and related land resources planning guidelines, but then found ways to ignore or stray widely from them. During this time, major river basin planning efforts across the United States proceeded, utilizing loosely organized committees composed of representatives of affected federal and state agencies. In Mississippi during this period, several river basin planning efforts ensued and ran to completion, the results of which, insofar as field implementation is concerned, remain questionable.

In 1985, when the Mississippi legislature completely overhauled our body of surface water and ground water regulatory statutes, Section 513 21, Mississippi Code Ann. (1972) was amended to specifically mandate preparation of a Statewide Water Resources Management Plan. This is the first specific legislative pronouncement of the need for such a plan, as well as the first mandate to produce it. The Department of Natural Resources then found itself in the position of the big dog that had chased cars for years and finally caught one - what are we going to do with it?

On its face, Section 51-3-21 appears to be blatant overkill. The statute is subdivided into ten specific subsections, several of which are so redundant that they meet themselves coming around. However, while the language of this particular statute bespeaks the frustration of its creators who were attempting to articulate the breadth and depth of the water resources planning concept, the intent of the law is unmistakable - to fully encompass those myriad issues recognized in traditional water resources planning and management over the past two or more decades.

So, while there can be no question that the Mississippi Legislature intends that the Department of Natural Resources will give thought in preparing a Statewide Water Resources Plan to a wide range of specific issues, the first step for the agency is to conceptualize the ultimate document and then outline its components, which will then lead to data collection and other essential tasks of the planning process itself. In this first phase of the statutory process, the objectives of the statewide plan must be hammered out. It is to be expected that a great deal of attention will be given to identifying, quantifying, and characterizing both our surface water and ground water resources statewide, and the current demands for, as well as pressures upon, these resources. With the help of statistical predictive tools such as computer modeling, it is also to be expected that a considerable effort will be made to project these factors into the future, assuming various growth scenarios and other factors likely to affect not only our water resources but also many other aspects of a growing Mississippi economy which will be secondarily impacted.

No doubt, the core of a statewide water resources management plan will be a current compendium of detailed information, but the thorniest question facing the Department of Natural Resources will likely be the extent to which the statewide

plan will attempt to go beyond data collection and assimilation into recommendations for actual management of water resources in various areas of the state, in recognition of either existing or predicted growth pressures. Beyond this, decisions must be made about how detailed this secondary level of planning should be; i.e., whether or not actual structural measures, implementation financing, and implementation institutional arrangements should be developed. Obviously, these questions pose major policy issues which affect all our citizens in Mississippi and must be thoroughly discussed with state leaders as they emerge - not merely at the end of some agency driven process produced internally. The last thing that is needed is simply another document which sits on shelves gathering dust, useless to anyone other than those looking for an archival reference work.

The next major question facing the Department of Natural Resources in its initial steps toward implementation of the statutory planning mandate is to determine how a statewide plan covering surface water and ground water resources will actually be generated, and who will be involved in the process. Since 1970, this writer has advocated the collective, collaborative effort of all affected state and federal agencies in the production of any water resources planning document which affects the entire State of Mississippi. In short, the concept of a "super agency" having the full range of technical skills and other resources necessary to produce such a plan is difficult to defend. While the many technical issues at hand clearly compel the involvement of certain agencies other than the Department of Natural Resources, the overriding policy issues already mentioned necessitate the involvement of many other governmental entities, as well. Just who these entities are remains to be seen, and will not be precisely known until the overall scope and objectives of the plan itself are fleshed out. Of course, the "team" will no doubt grow considerably if it is decided that the statewide water resources management plan should be developed to the degree of structural recommendations. Implementation of such recommendations at the local level cannot be accomplished without the active involvement of many local political leaders and other policymakers.

When the matter of institutional arrangements is considered, a threshold question focuses on substate governmental entities which are, or likely will be, involved in some aspect of the water resources management business. This status report is not intended to address the many questions surrounding the broad issue of regional governmental entities, but suffice it to say that there are nagging policy questions in this regard that simply must be dealt with before any statewide plan, even if meaningfully prepared, will be implemented. Presently, Mississippi has a plethora of substate entities of one persuasion or another. Without more, it must be said here that there are many technical and political complexities inherent in this particular issue which must ultimately be resolved.

Finally, there remains the ability of the Department of Natural Resources to tackle the overall water resources management planning mandate in the first instance. When the legislature finished its admirable work during the 1985 session, they were given a request for budget augmentation for the Department of Natural Resources to implement their statutory directives. The response to this request was to authorize just over half the total number of positions sought for the range of additional activities inherent in the legislation. Since that time, budget cuts have reduced that portion of the technical staff approved in 1985, and the current and next budget reductions will likely further reduce capability of the agency to do this required work. In short, the legislature has, on the one hand, said that it wants certain statewide water resources planning work to be done but, on the other hand, has denied the Department of Natural Resources the requisite funding to accomplish these tasks. Until the legislature wants badly enough to actually accomplish what it already has said is essential for the citizens of the State of Mississippi, progress on the preparation of a statewide water resources management plan will remain frustrated. In the interim, the manifestations of declining ground water levels, prolonged drought, and similar water problems will more and more prompt our citizens to ask why the Department of Natural Resources is not getting on with its mission to deal with these problems. A very short explanation of what has been done to the Department of Natural Resources in the budget process generally causes inquirers to walk away shaking their heads and muttering something to themselves about elections.