



Fast Facts

According to a 2002 University of Georgia study, there are approximately 68,000 reservoirs in Georgia, which represents the highest density of dams in the Southeast. The state should prioritize the preservation of its remaining sections of free-flowing rivers and streams.

The Alliance for Water Efficiency estimates it costs roughly \$0.46 to \$1.40 to produce 1000 gallons of water through more stringent water efficiency and conservation measures versus the \$4,000 it would cost for the same amount of water from a new reservoir.

Because of federal and state permitting, reservoirs can take over 10 years to come online, assuming that rainfall is sufficient to fill them. Conservation and efficiency can be used to provide water supply right now.

For More Information:
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Georgia Water Coalition

Evaluating Reservoirs

What's at Stake?

As historic droughts continue and more people move to Georgia, some of our state's water resources are becoming increasingly stressed. Many of our officials believe that new water supply reservoirs are the best way to "drought-proof" Georgia and to allow for several million more people to move to metropolitan Atlanta. However, water supply reservoirs are the most environmentally costly, not to mention the most expensive, water supply option. Our officials should look to alternatives, particularly low-hanging fruit options such as increased water conservation and efficiency before resorting to the long lead times of such massive new dam infrastructure. Georgia's remaining sections of free-flowing rivers and streams will be forever altered if the state constructs many more reservoirs.

Challenges

Atlanta is one of the largest cities in the country that lies within one of the smallest watersheds, primarily the Upper Chattahoochee Basin. Metro Atlanta has always been challenged to identify reliable water sources; its primary sources are now Lake Lanier and the Chattahoochee River, Lake Allatoona and the Etowah River. In addition to these sources, several cities and counties in the metro area have constructed their own reservoirs, ranging from hundreds to thousands of acres in size on tributaries of the Chattahoochee and Etowah Rivers and other streams. Rather than shift growth to areas of the state that have natural water supplies available, many believe we can continue to engineer our way out of the water limitation by constructing more reservoirs.

Roughly a dozen new water supply reservoirs have been proposed for construction in Georgia. Many of these have been permitted and are underway. Some, such as two proposed dams on the Flint River, may take decades to become reality. These reservoirs cost anywhere from \$50 million to hundreds of millions of dollars to permit and build, if they are allowed to proceed. Now is the time to stop focusing on these expensive projects.

Putting dams on rivers chokes off flow downstream, depriving communities and aquatic systems of the flows they need for ecosystem function, economic use and recreation. Many rivers downstream from dams are in a state of almost permanent drought flow because much less water flows out of their reservoirs. They fragment stream habitat, preventing fish and other aquatic species from migrating to their feeding or spawning grounds. Reservoirs also cause dirt and silt to build up behind the dam, requiring expensive dredging or other means to maintain the storage capacity of the reservoir. On the other hand, water conservation and efficiency measures cost only a fraction of the price for a new water supply reservoir, and conservation does not harm Georgia's river systems or the property values of those who live along and use those rivers.

Next Steps

- The General Assembly should pass legislation facilitating water conservation and efficiency measures as the cheapest, fastest option for new water supply.
- The General Assembly should mandate an economic and environmental cost-benefit analysis to be performed when a reservoir is proposed, which should be made available to the public and affected local, state, and federal officials.
- The Georgia Environmental Protection Division should study alternatives to reservoir proposals and evaluate all direct and cumulative impacts of new reservoirs. The study process should be transparent with opportunities for public involvement.