



Fast Facts

Unrestricted interbasin transfers can devastate “donor rivers.” The Colorado River, drained by Denver, Phoenix and Southern California, has seen its discharge to the Gulf of California reduced to less than 6 percent of historic discharges.

Massive energy use is required in transporting water across river basins. In California, 20 percent of the state’s electricity used is for moving and treating water, primarily from water-rich Northern California to water-poor Southern California.

Water transfers create intra and interstate conflicts. In 2007, in a move reminiscent of Georgia’s water battles, South Carolina filed suit in federal court to prevent North Carolina communities from transferring water from the Catawba River.

Interbasin transfers can be avoided through water conservation efforts. In metro Atlanta, replacing the region’s old water-wasting toilets with low-flow models would save 42 million gallons a day by 2030, nearly double the current Etowah-to-Chattahoochee transfer.

For More Information:
Coosa River Basin Initiative,
Joe Cook

Georgia Water Coalition

Grow Where Water is Adequate Rather than Move Water to Promote Growth

What’s at Stake?

Depending on what part of Georgia you hail from, interbasin transfers are commonly referred to as simply “water transfers,” or more descriptively, “grand theft water”—the latter moniker being used most often in downstream communities where residents see water leaving their rivers upstream, never to return for their use, enjoyment and economic benefit.

No other water issue has as much potential to divide Georgia into warring factions or has as much potential to set off new wars with neighboring states. While moving water from water-rich areas to water-poor areas will always be part of the state’s water supply toolbox, this issue is so divisive and has so much potential to harm our state’s waterways and the economic future of downstream communities, it demands our immediate attention.

Challenges

We must enact measures now that will guide the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) in decisions regarding issuance of permits for transferring water between river basins, with consideration of all the effects of such transfers, and measures, such as mandatory return flows, to mitigate their effects.

On the Chattahoochee River, communities like LaGrange and West Point are denied about 55 million gallons a day through water transfers in metro Atlanta. On the Etowah and Coosa Rivers, Cartersville and Rome currently forfeit some 23 million gallons a day (MGD) to transfers to metro Atlanta. During critical summer months, when water withdrawals are at their highest and our rivers are at their lowest, these transfers generally increase. It has been suggested that the Etowah-to-Chattahoochee transfer could grow to as much as 150 MGD in the future—a level that could translate into a 29 percent reduction in flows at Rome during drought conditions.

Interbasin transfers fundamentally alter natural water flows. This translates into irreparable damage to the health of our rivers and the long term economic vitality of downstream communities.

Currently, Georgia law regulating interbasin transfers is weak, leaving much discretion to the EPD Director. All that is required for certain parts of the state is the issuance of a press release in the impacted areas and consideration of “competing existing uses.”

For such a contentious issue with many repercussions for our environment and our economy, this simply is not enough.

Next Steps

State legislators can help protect Georgia’s rivers from the adverse effects of interbasin transfers by:

- Passing legislation that increases restrictions on new interbasin transfers, allowing them only in narrowly defined circumstances and establishing criteria for the EPD to use in evaluating proposed new or expanded transfers; or
- Urging EPD to initiate a rulemaking process, in accordance with the Comprehensive Statewide Water Plan, that will result in the adoption as rules and regulations of EPD the interbasin transfer guidelines outlined in the Water Plan.