

# ESTABLISHING A REGIONAL FORUM TO ADDRESS WATER RESOURCE CHALLENGES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES: A CONCEPT FOR REGIONAL COLLABORATION

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**Abstract.** This paper describes a proposed concept for a state-led, federally-supported alliance among the southeastern states to address emerging water resource challenges from a regional perspective and summarizes ongoing and anticipated future efforts to establish this alliance. A regional water resource alliance in the Southeast would provide a means to maintain ongoing multi-state regional dialogue; develop regional strategies and establish regional priorities; provide for regional advocacy with the Administration, Congress, interest groups, business and industry, and others; and promote creation of innovative interstate partnerships.

Emerging challenges for water resource management in the Southeast include: current and projected population growth and distribution; implication of climate change on quantity, timing, and distribution of precipitation and on sea levels; energy development stemming from emerging national efforts to attain energy independence.

**Introduction.** In 2007, the Commander, US Army Corps of Engineers, South Atlantic Division, made a proposal to the Governors of several southeastern states that they consider the establishment of a state-led, federally-supported alliance among the southeastern states to address existing and emerging water resource challenges in the region. The basic premise for the alliance is to improve economic opportunity, environmental quality, and social well-being in the Southeast through effective water resources development and management across the region.

A regional water resource alliance in the Southeast would provide a means to: (1) maintain ongoing multi-state regional dialogue on water resource issues and priorities; (2) develop regional strategies and establish regional priorities for water resource management and investments; (3) provide for regional advocacy with the Administration, Congress, Tribes, interest groups (including those representing city and county governments, business, industry, agriculture, and conservation), and others in regard to Federal water resource legislation, policy, and funding priorities; and (4)

promote creation of innovative interstate partnerships to address critical water resource issues. The initial geographic focus includes the states of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. This focus area could be expanded as the states determine appropriate. Key Federal partners with water resource related responsibilities would work with the states in support of the regional forum to form an effective regional intergovernmental team.

Future generations of Americans are counting on our collective State and Federal leadership to address critical regional water resource challenges to insure that we remain competitive in a dynamic world economy; protect our environment; sustain and improve our quality of life; and balance the growing and competing demands that are being placed on our water resources.

**Background.** In order for the United States to remain competitive in a just-in-time global economy, critical water resource management challenges and infrastructure requirements in the Southeast must be addressed in a broader regional context. Collaborative regional strategies and priorities will help clarify and bring focus to the "Federal interest", lead to streamlining project-level authorization and appropriation processes, and likely provide the basis for reorienting Federal water resource programs from a fragmented "bottom up" approach to a "shared vision" approach.

Much of the southeastern US is experiencing serious drought, one of the driest periods in recorded history. Water use restrictions of varying severity have been triggered, ranging from voluntary restrictions to outright bans on outdoor water use over large areas. Uncertainty regarding the length and severity of the present drought create significant concern in the region over potential impacts to economic well-being, environmental quality, and quality of life. With each successive period of drought in the Southeast, the observed impacts will likely be more severe because the region is experiencing rapid growth. The region will become increasingly vulnerable

to potentially disastrous economic and environmental impacts during severe drought periods.

Other serious and pervasive water resource challenges transcend state boundaries in the Southeast. Much of our water resource infrastructure (storage, treatment, distribution, and collection systems) is aging and in need of major rehabilitation or replacement. Limited funding is often insufficient to cover routine operation and maintenance costs, and our ability to make needed new water resource investments is constrained at all levels of government. The demand for port development and navigation channel improvement investments is outpacing the Nation's ability to provide sufficient Federal resources. The significant population shift into vulnerable coastal areas demands a careful look at Federal water resource investments in these areas and the role of state and local land use planners in developing integrated plans and strategies in a broader systems context. Needed investments to sustain and restore vital, "world class" aquatic ecosystems in the Southeast must compete, often unsuccessfully, for an appropriate share of the limited resources currently available. Regulatory processes and decisions governing water resource uses and associated impacts are often reactive and single-project focused rather than innovative and regionally-based (or system-based).

In addition to growth pressures and resource constraints, the potential implications of climate change pose increased degrees of uncertainty for the region's water resources, demanding that the states in the region pursue more effective regional interaction and collaboration to develop strategies to adapt to increased climate variability. Potential for significant sea level rise and dramatically altered precipitation patterns and timing support increased regional dialogue, information sharing, and scenario planning. Additionally, the Nation will be pursuing aggressive efforts to move toward energy independence over the next few decades by way of increased development of domestic energy sources in the U.S. (including hydropower, nuclear power, bio-fuels, and others). The Southeast will play a major role in the national pursuit of energy independence. The direct and indirect implications of energy development efforts on the water resources of the Southeast are significant.

**The Approach – Regional Collaboration through a Multi-State Regional Forum.** A new "model" for Federal-state collaboration and program integration has emerged in recent years. All of the water resource challenges summarized above transcend local and state boundaries. Most agencies at all levels and stakeholder interests acknowledge merit in the concept of multi-state regional planning and problem-solving, conducted in the

context of a standing regional forum (e.g., a regional water resource alliance). A successful regional water resource alliance would have the following characteristics:

- State leadership
- Federal agency commitment and support
- Collaborative and consensus-based
- Action-oriented

The States are best positioned to:

- Assemble a regional leadership team to organize a regional water resource forum (perhaps sponsored by the Southern Governor's Association),
- Agree on critical regional requirements that have national implications (commerce, etc.) and pursue a national mandate for action,
- Establish over-arching regional priorities for water resource investments, including de-authorization decisions where appropriate,
- Develop and advance regionally-based strategies/plans to the Administration and Congress,
- Help sort out and clarify Federal versus state responsibilities on water resource issues,
- Establish greater accountability for actions to address states' priorities.

The Federal agencies can align their programs, focus their resources, and share their technical capabilities to help the states address their regional and individual objectives and priorities, consistent with the overall Federal interest.

**The Opportunity – A Regional Water Resource Alliance.** Establishment of a regional water resources alliance in the Southeast could serve both the near term requirements of representing state interests in an intergovernmental regional water resource planning effort, as well as provide a forum for long term integrated regional water resource planning and collaboration. Two existing regional water resource forums may have characteristics that are applicable and relevant to the Southeastern states:

- Great Lakes Water Management Initiative (formed in 1985), sponsored by the Council of Great Lakes Governors, [www.cglg.org/projects/water/index.asp](http://www.cglg.org/projects/water/index.asp)
- Western States Water Council (WSWC) (formed in 1965), sponsored by the Western Governors' Association, [www.westgov.org/wswc](http://www.westgov.org/wswc)

While these regional forums may not precisely fit the needs and goals of the Southeastern states, the mission statements, objectives, guiding principles, and lessons learned from these efforts may provide insights and concepts that would be helpful in forging an appropriate

regional water resource forum for the Southeast. A regional water resource alliance would not limit, negate, or supersede any individual state's legal authorities or prerogatives in regard to water resource decisions within its purview.

Additionally, several focused regional initiatives have recently emerged in the Southeast that possess many of the basic attributes of the proposed regional water resource alliance and, to a limited extent, address some of the same water resource and related issues. Examples include:

- The Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability (SERPPAS) is a DOD/five-state (NC, SC, GA, FL, and AL) partnership (also involving other Federal agencies) to basically pursue "win-win" solutions to potential conflicts between military operations and training activities and regional natural resource conservation objectives. Web site - [www.serppas.org/](http://www.serppas.org/)
- The Gulf of Mexico Alliance is a five-state partnership focused on five priority issues in the Gulf of Mexico. The states (FL, AL, MS, LA, and TX) have aligned, collaborated, and produced a Gulf Alliance Governors' Action Plan. Pertinent Federal departments and agencies have collectively committed to align their programs and resources to support the Action Plan. Web site - [www.dep.state.fl.us/gulf/](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/gulf/)
- Based upon the early successes of the Gulf Alliance and SERPPAS, four South Atlantic states (NC, SC, GA, and FL) are actively discussing the potential formation of a South Atlantic Alliance to address priority issues in their coastal and near shore marine areas.

The potential regional water resources alliance addressed herein would fully consider these and other pertinent state-led water and related land resource initiatives, and it would complement and build upon (rather than duplicate, overlap, or supersede) these ongoing efforts.

Federal support for the regional water resource alliance could be organized and coordinated under the auspices of the Southeast Natural Resources Leadership Group (SENRLG). SENRLG consists of the regional directors of ten (10) Federal agencies with natural resource and/or environmental stewardship responsibilities. Federal agencies with relevant responsibilities can be added to the SENRLG team to help synchronize Federal capabilities and authorities in support of this initiative.

**Actions to Implement a Regional Water Resource Alliance.** The US Army Corps of Engineers, South Atlantic Division, determined that a regional alliance of southeastern states [working collaboratively on critical water resource challenges with broad regional (and national) implications] would be immensely helpful in providing strategic direction and focus as it carries out its programs across the region. The Corps elected to pursue a role as a catalyst or facilitator for dialogue among the states to fully explore reasonable opportunities to establish a regional alliance.

Beginning in late 2007, Corps representatives met with states individually to share the concept and to seek their initial feedback and level of interest in a regional alliance. Informal discussions with the states have continued, building toward a regional workshop (anticipated for December 2008) that will bring representatives of the eight states together to jointly explore the merits and feasibility of establishing a state-led regional water resource alliance. Correspondence and direct discussions with the respective Governors and their staffs have enabled the participants to sustain a high level of visibility for this initiative within each state. If the states collectively see merit and "value-added" in a regional alliance, the goal would be to develop a charter (or partnership agreement) to the Governors for their signatures.

From the beginning, it was clear that establishing a state-led, federally supported, Southeast regional water resource alliance would require coordination and consultation with various interests in addition to the states. Some of those other key relationships include:

- Southern Governors' Association (SGA) – This organization appears to be the most well suited to serve as overall sponsor for a SE regional water resource council. The SGA Executive Director, SGA Federal Programs Coordinator, and the state liaisons to SGA (who are directly connected back to their respective Governors' offices) have been involved in multiple discussions in regard to their potential support for a regional water resource alliance. While the SGA has a number of constraints associated with their possible "sponsorship" of a regional water resource alliance, they nonetheless remain very interested in this initiative and have remained appropriately engaged in the continuing dialogue to promote, leverage, and shape this proposed alliance.
- Federal Partners – The Corps briefed the regional executives of the Federal natural resource

agencies [all members of the SE Natural Resources Leaders Group (SENRLG)], on the proposed regional water resource alliance in December 2007. SENRLG is an alliance of 10 Federal agencies with direct natural resource/environmental responsibilities. All the pertinent Federal agencies with direct interests in water resource issues were supportive of this initiative and offered their assistance to help the states establish a regional water resource alliance. These agencies continue to stay engaged in the continuing dialogue and are open to establishing a Federal support team for the proposed regional alliance.

- Stakeholders – Stakeholder awareness of, and support for, a regional water resource alliance is ultimately critical to its success. Key stakeholders include local governments; water supply providers; environmental organizations; power companies; business, industry, and agriculture interests; navigation interests; and many others. Specific outreach efforts are being undertaken to broadly share the concept for an effective Southeast regional water resource alliance. To date, most stakeholders have expressed strong support for the concept and want to know how they can help make it a reality. From their perspective, they see potential efficiencies in collaborative problem solving, reduced water resource conflict across the region, and a higher degree of predictability for meeting future water resource needs through effective strategic planning and more clearly defined regional priorities. As the concept for a regional alliance is more fully developed and implemented, stakeholder engagement with the states and Federal partners will become more robust and interactive.

**Conclusion.** The proposed Southeast regional water resource alliance has the potential to have a significant positive impact on how water resource issues will be addressed in the region in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The regional alliance of states, with support and assistance from key Federal partners and stakeholders, will be able to more effectively address emerging issues with broad regional implications through collaboration and collective action, where appropriate. The outcomes of this collaborative process will also yield benefits that add value to the individual efforts of the southeastern states as they strive to successfully meet the water resource needs of their citizens.