

A LOOK BACK PUTS WATER ISSUES INTO PERSPECTIVE

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It almost seems that the only way we can see rainfall these days is to turn on the television.

As a surprise to no one, Oconee County is in the midst of a severe drought that was declared in 2006. The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) defines a drought as “a period of abnormally dry weather sufficiently prolonged from the lack of precipitation to cause a serious hydrologic imbalance.” Simply put, droughts are caused by a lack of rain. However, it is important to note that our usage of scarce water resources can increase or decrease the effects of the limited rainfall.

Drought

Droughts are not new phenomenon to this area or even the state. Since records have been kept by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) in the 1800's, there have been nine sustained droughts recorded in the state.

The first recorded drought within the state was from 1903 to 1905. According to USGS, many communities across the state had to conserve sparse water supplies for livestock and machinery, and many factories were forced to close or operate at half capacity.

Between 1930 and 1935, a major drought affected much of the United States and parts of the country were referred to as “the dust bowl.” At that time, the drought was estimated to be a twenty-five year drought, meaning the conditions of this severity would most likely occur only once every twenty-five years.

The drought Georgia experienced from 1985 to 1989 resulted in the lowest stream flows of the century throughout northern Georgia. Severe water-supply shortages began occurring in the state during the early months of 1986. Henry Hibbs, of the Oconee County Cooperative Extension Service, recounted the effects of this drought on the agricultural community.

He recalled that, as a result of this drought, the old railroad station operating in Watkinsville at the time, received hay that was brought into the community from portions of the northeastern and mid-western United States where rainfall levels were more abundant. From a hub located in Atlanta, and was worked by the inmate population, hay was loaded on railcars and trucks for distribution to various parts of the state.

Hay was sent by farmers from other parts of the country through their generosity and concern for fellow farmers. However, they certainly did not send their finest products for the relief efforts – they had to make a living also. When railcars were opened, no one really knew if there would be large bales of hay, small bales of hay, or alfalfa on the car. While this proved to be somewhat problematic for those charged with distribution in each community, the fact remained that communities across the country pitched in to help Georgia when in need. It should be noted that Georgia reciprocated by returning hay to those generous areas of the country once we had adequate rainfall.

Water Supply

Through time, changes occurred within this community that altered the way that water was provided to residents. Individual wells were the original sources of water within Oconee County. A transition was then made for a public water system which was operated by the City of Watkinsville in (insert year).

In 1982, additional water was necessary to supplement public wells within the community. The Oconee County Public Utility Authority contracted with Athens for water to supplement the wells. This supplemental water was combined with water from local wells to meet the local demand. Oconee County obtained the bulk of its supplemental water from Athens (subsequently Athens-Clarke County) until 1999. Due to rate increases from Athens-Clarke County, Oconee County sought to partner with Walton County and purchase water to meet the demand until the Bear Creek Reservoir was completed. At that time, a purchase agreement with Walton County saved Oconee County up to \$55,000 per month in charges for water.

Through time, Oconee County was dependent upon other communities to provide water to sustain the livelihood of those living and working within the county. Oconee County was a customer relying on another

supplier – with whom we had no control – to supply one of our most basic commodities. As time progressed, Oconee County entered into agreements where we became the owner of our water, rather than just a customer. When you are a customer you are dependent upon someone else to determine what you pay for water and how much you are actually allotted. Ownership of a reservoir and water treatment facility enables local control over the water supply.

Bear Creek Reservoir

It was during the drought of the late 1980s that there was a realization that a regional reservoir was needed to meet our ever-changing water needs and to provide water during periods of drought. The process began with a site selection and a governing organization, and in December 1989, the Upper Oconee Basin Water Authority (UOBWA) was formed. Two years later, an application for a 404 water withdrawal permit for the Bear Creek Reservoir was filed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Division.

It wasn't until 1996 that an intergovernmental agreement was signed by Barrow, Clarke, Jackson and Oconee Counties for what is now known as the Bear Creek Reservoir, and it wasn't until 2001 that Bear Creek Reservoir began filling with water. Finally, thirteen years after the UOBWA was formed, Oconee County received its first drop of water from Bear Creek Reservoir in 2002.

During that lengthy period of time, a series of events occurred wherein the City of Watkinsville transferred the ownership and operation of its water system to Oconee County. Additionally, through agreements to provide our citizens with water, Oconee County found it necessary to purchase water from Athens-Clarke County and Walton County to meet daily demand before Bear Creek Reservoir became operational.

Hard Labor Creek Reservoir

Additionally, in 1990, an Oconee County Water Task Force was formed. This group was charged to study sub-regional projects focusing on the Apalachee River as a water source. Eight years later (1998) the Hard Labor Creek Reservoir option became a possibility. Earlier this year, the Oconee County Board of Commissioners voted to partner with Walton County to jointly construct the Hard Labor Creek Reservoir. This reservoir is not anticipated to provide the first drop of water for Oconee County (or Walton County) until the year 2014. Hard Labor Creek is anticipated to take 24 from the beginning of the discussions until water will be available; however, Bear Creek took only 13 years.

Drought Relief

While significant focus is typically on the years of drought, lost in the shuffle are years with more rainfall. It is far too easy to forget that as recently as 2005 this area received an abundance of rainfall. From January to August of 2005, the National Weather Service reported that the Athens area had experienced a 14.37 inch surplus for the year. However, beginning in September 2005, drought conditions were becoming evident, but the area still finished with a surplus of 10.42 inches of rain for the year.

Years of significant rainfall are necessary to replenish groundwater and maintain deep-soil moisture levels to sustain us during years of lesser rainfall. Georgia's State Climatologist David Stooksbury, during the drought in 2000 stated, "We will have more years that are extremely wet and more years that are extremely dry, which historically is the more common pattern." It seems as though Stooksbury was accurate in his assessment.

It is our common task and responsibility to manage our scarce natural resources and the lack of rainfall we are experiencing. This vital management effort occurs in a variety of ways. Public utility departments must work to minimize water leaks that escape the system between the time it is treated and is ultimately used by the consumer; our elected officials must make difficult decisions that may affect the daily lives of residents and businesses; and members of the general public must heed the call to conserve.

Oconee County, you have responded marvelously with your conservation methods and your reduction in water consumption! But, the drought is not over, and the water levels are not rising. These measures that you are implementing to conserve water must continue for all of our well-being and economic health.