

Lack of Ga. drought plan riles critics

By GREG BLUESTEIN, Associated Press Writer Sun Oct 28, 7:50 PM ET

ATLANTA - Despite plenty of warnings, critics say, Georgia never got around to developing a water management plan to handle a severe drought. Now that reservoirs already are shrinking and water supplies are threatened, lawmakers are scrambling to cope.

After years of lax zoning laws and pro-growth policies that led to urban sprawl throughout much of north Georgia, politicians are preparing a statewide water plan that would guide Georgia's growth and provide emergency drought plans.

Some are talking about building a network of state reservoirs to supplement the federal reservoirs they say they can no longer rely on.

"With great crisis comes great opportunity," said state Rep. Lynn Smith.

The drought that started in parts of Georgia and Alabama in early 2006 has spread throughout the region, worsened by sweltering temperatures and a drier-than-normal hurricane season. Now drought in almost one-third of the Southeast has been deemed "exceptional" — the most severe drought category.

Few places are feeling the pinch as much as north Georgia.

In April, the state restricted outdoor watering to three days a week. In September, state officials banned virtually all outdoor watering in the northern part of the state. By then, many cities and counties had already ordered similar restrictions.

This past week, with reservoir levels at record lows, Gov. Sonny Perdue ordered public water utilities in north Georgia to cut their water withdrawals by 10 percent, and required state agencies to cut usage. The Republican chief executive also declared a state of emergency in the region and asked the federal government to release less water from its reservoirs.

Much of the state's attention has been focused on the Army Corps of Engineers, which controls releases from federal reservoirs in the region and is caught in the middle of a water tug-of-war between Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

The Corps releases more than a billion gallons of water each day from Lake Lanier, which supplies more than 3 million Georgia residents with water. The agency bases its water releases on two downstream requirements: The minimum flow needed to supply a coal-fired power plant Florida and mandates to protect two mussel species in a Florida river.

Georgia has filed suit demanding the Corps of Engineers reduce the amount of water it pours downstream.

Critics say the state is blaming the Corps to avoid dealing with its own shortfalls.

"All of this avoidance of planning has been to avoid having to honestly state that there are limits to the amount of water available in various parts of the state," said Neill Herring, an environmental lobbyist. "There are concrete limits to growth — and no one wants to admit that."

Each legislative attempt to hash out a plan over the last two decades has ended in failure.

In the 1990s, plans to build state reservoirs failed, partly because of builders upset they would be barred from developing homes on the lakes. A water plan based on selling permits was beaten back in 2003 by critics who suggested that neighboring states would be able to purchase them and worsen the crisis. And an effort to build a state-funded regional reservoir was scuttled in 2004.

"There's no question this situation could have been avoided," said former Gov. Roy Barnes, a Democrat. "This is nothing new. We've known this for a long time. We have a state approaching nine million people. The idea we have no plan for water — I don't know how to describe it."

Barnes said his 2002 defeat thwarted his plans to build a network of state reservoirs and help local governments fix leaky pipes.

Perdue said his order Wednesday to cut water usage by 10 percent was a first step and that more restrictions could be on the way, earning cheers from environmentalists.

However, environmentalists said there's no substitute from a concrete water usage plan.

"If we want to change the forecast for wildlife and people in our region, we need a long term water use plan for Georgia," said F.G. Courtney, director of the National Wildlife Federation's Southeast office.

The Legislature will have its chance in January. On the agenda is a proposal to spend \$30 million to assess Georgia's water resources and how best to use them.

"This is about men, women and children having drinking water. We think it's time to modify our priorities and start protecting the people," says House Speaker Glenn Richardson.

Another measure could pave the way for more state-funded reservoirs to capture the 50 inches of rain that falls over Georgia each year.

"If we can just manage the rainfall and utilize that and make sure that we have abundant storage for it, we can take care of our needs well into the future," said Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle.
