

Southern Group of State Foresters – Issue Paper

Subject:

Forest Water Quality and Quantity

Situation:

State water quality data compiled by EPA indicates that more than half of the South's surface waters are moderately or seriously impaired. Primary sources of impairment include agriculture and urban runoff. Southern forests, on the other hand, produce the highest quality water of any land use. These waters support reliable potable water supplies, incomparable aquatic species diversity and are sources for recreation for the region's expanding population. Water quantity has recently emerged as an important issue in several states, even leading to litigation among Florida, Alabama, and Georgia – each state seeking to ensure ample water for growth and environmental benefits. Forest treatments can affect water production, timing and flow, but these effects are not widely understood or appreciated by the public. Proactive efforts by Southern state forestry agencies to protect forest water quality, and by the U.S. Forest Service to understand treatment effects are exemplary, but can get overwhelmed in the public's view by sometimes-negative media coverage. Future Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) implementation may unfairly penalize forest landowners and treatments because of inaccurate perceptions and a lack of relevant cause/effect information.

Background:

The South has historically enjoyed ample rainfall to support healthy forests and aquatic resources, and Southern waters are among the most diverse in the world. Potable water has been plentiful thanks to the presence of forests to filter it and regulate its release. For more than 25 years, Southern state forestry agencies have been national leaders in cooperating with other agencies and the private sector to protect state waters by developing and promoting Best Management Practices (BMPs). The Southern Research Station has provided some of the world's earliest and most important information on how forests and their management affect water resources. As the South has urbanized and demand for clean surface water has increased (for recreation, fishing and potable water) so has public interest in the region's waters. Being the single largest land use in the South, forests and their management are certain to remain focal points of public interest and concern.

Relevance to the South:

Increasing public interest combined with the forestry community's investment to date in understanding and protecting water resources make it important that these efforts be sustained and that the public be made aware of them. Funding of water resource programs, types of public oversight of forest management, and ultimately landowner costs are all likely to be influenced by these efforts.