2014 Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum

Final Report

February 2015

***Introduction***

The US Endowment for Forestry and Communities in Aiken, SC is using private and USDA Forest Service funding to partner with five southeastern states (Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina and Texas) on a regional project called the Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water. The effort is building on the work that South Carolina Rural Water conducted in Greenville, South Carolina in 2012, hosting a collaborative forum of drinking water utilities, forestry interests, state and local agencies, and conservation groups. The gathering provided information about the importance of drinking water source protection, forestry perspectives, and creative financing tools for source water protection in forested watersheds. Participants agreed that healthy, well-managed forests are critical to the Southeast’s drinking water supply, and that maintaining or expanding healthy forests in watersheds is a cost-effective and appealing strategy for helping ensure clean, abundant supplies of water.

The goals of the Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water are to:

* Help maintain or expand healthy forests in drinking water watersheds
* Initiate and develop working relationships between state and local agencies, Rural Water Associations, forestry interests and conservation groups
* Identify watersheds and initiatives that have high potential for cooperative forest conservation, sound management and restoration
* Explore pilot projects to implement creative watershed protection strategies such as Payment for Watershed Services and forestry best management practices, demonstrating the interdependence of healthy forests and drinking water.

To do this the Partnership hired a contractor, Kitty Weisman, to work with drinking water, forestry, and conservation partners from March 1, 2014 through February 28th, 2015 to organize planning meetings in each of the five states with the ultimate goal of hosting a collaborative forests and drinking water forum in each state. The forums are modeled after the 2012 Greenville, South Carolina forum and are intended to share knowledge, available technical resources and assistance, and identify potential target watersheds in each state for further cooperative action. The first forum to be held under this contract was for Georgia on November 17th and 18th in Savannah. This report provides detailed information about the planning and convening of the Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum, including key themes and follow up actions.

***Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum Planning***

Several key individuals representing drinking water and forestry organizations indicated an early interest in helping to plan a Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum:

* Jimmy Matthews, Executive Director, Georgia Rural Water Association
* Steve McWilliams, Executive Director, Georgia Forestry Association
* Jerry Stapp, Source Water Protection Specialist, Georgia Rural Water Association
* Bob Hanner, Executive Manager of Water Policy, Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission
* John Colberg, Forest Water Quality Program Coordinator, Georgia Forestry Commission
* Laura Walter, Water and Sewer Environmental Administrator, City of Savannah
* Debra Beazley, Superintendent of Water Production, City of Augusta Utilities
* Robert Olive, Source Water Protection Program Coordinator, US Environmental Protection Agency Region 4
* Peter Stangel, US Endowment for Forestry and Communities
* Kitty Weisman, Contractor with US Endowment for Forestry and Communities

This core planning team met every 2-3 weeks for a period of about four months to plan the Forum. Most meetings were conference calls, but the planning team did meet in smaller groups in person three or four times as well. Planning success was due in large part to leadership provided by Jimmy Matthews of Georgia Rural Water and Steve McWilliams of Georgia Forestry Association. Both are dynamic leaders who are well-connected and visionary, and both believed that the Forum was an important step to foster collaboration between the drinking water and forestry communities, which they believed was a natural connection that hadn’t been fully explored or realized until now.

Another factor for success was an on-site meeting at the chosen Forum venue, the Savannah Marriott Riverfront hotel. The planning team met at the venue over two days to hammer out Forum details and logistics, view the meeting facilities, and strategize the best approach for convening the Forum. This on-site gathering helped ensure predictability of the venue and agreement about logistics.

The planning team decided several key logistical details for the Forum including:

* Ensure that invited participants and speakers were high-level decision-makers and experts who have the ability to carry forth and spread the messages of the Forum as leaders in their field.
* Plan and convene a professional-style conference at a quality venue in a desirable location, providing meals and snacks with no registration fee. Participants would be responsible for covering the cost of their own travel and hotel room;
* Hold a fellowship “meet and greet” session the evening before the Forum to introduce participants to each other and to the substantive purpose and expectations of the Forum;
* Organize Forum speakers into key “themes” and limit speaking time to 15 minutes per speaker to ensure enough time for discussion and brainstorming;
* Hold one large group discussion and brainstorming session with all participants after each set of themed presentations, instead of holding break-out sessions with smaller discussion groups;
* Ensure that discussion and brainstorming sessions were moderated by experienced meeting facilitators.
* Plan on attendance of 45-60 participants, including 10-12 speakers

Because the planning team decided that the Forum should be a high-quality, conference style event including free meals and no registration fee, it became clear that the group would need to raise additional funds to pay for the venue and catering. After visiting the event venue and pricing meeting rooms and catering, the group determined that they would need between $9,000 and $12,000 to cover the costs of the Forum and still provide free registration to all participants. This meant that the planning team needed to raise additional funds for the Forum. In a relatively short time period, the group was able to raise $11,750 for planning and conference costs (Attachment 1). This fundraising success was primarily due to the strong conviction and commitment of the two planning team leads, Jimmy Matthews and Steve McWilliams.

***Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum Convening***

On November 17th and 18th, 65 leaders from Georgia’s forestry and drinking water sectors (Appendix A) convened in Savannah at the first-ever Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum to explore the connections between forests and drinking water, and to brainstorm ways to work together to continue to sustain these two very important and interdependent resources.

The Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum was convened with the knowledge that forests and drinking water are strongly connected and dependent on each other. Southeastern forests that are actively managed can help protect and increase drinking water supplies while also providing economic benefits. And our communities require clean and plentiful drinking water to thrive.

The Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum was intended to begin a collaborative relationship between the forestry and drinking water sectors, and to think creatively about Georgia's future to help ensure the viability of both sectors.

The goals of the Forum were to:

• Share information with each other about the strong connection between forests and drinking water

• Share information with each other about the challenges and day-to-day operations of the forestry and drinking water sectors

• Provide local examples of collaboration between forestry and drinking water

• Have fruitful discussions about the nature of the forestry and drinking water connection in Georgia

• Develop a short list of actions that we can take together in the near future to continue the momentum from the Forum

Most Forum participants gathered the evening before the Forum in an informal fellowship session over drinks and refreshments. The purpose of this gathering was to introduce participants to each other, begin informal collaborative discussions, and foster a collegial atmosphere. The next day, the Forum was organized into three substantive themes, listed below, with 15 minute presentations by each speaker. Each theme was followed by a facilitated group discussion:

***The Forest and Water Connection***

* Peter Stangel, US Endowment for Forestry and Communities – Connection Between Forests and Drinking Water
* Professor Graeme Lockaby, Ph.D, Auburn University – Forests, Water and the Human Health Connection
* Peter Caldwell, Ph.D., US Forest Service – Dependence of Communities on Forest Lands

***Drinking Water and Forestry Overview***

* + Russ Pennington, Georgia Environmental Protection Division – Overview of Georgia Basin Planning
  + Allen Saxon, City of Augusta Utilities – Drinking Water Overview
  + Todd Rasmussen, University of Georgia’s Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources and John Colberg, Georgia Forestry Commission – Forestry Overview

***Watershed Protection Incentives and Funding***

* + Steve McWilliams, Executive Director, Georgia Forestry Association – Georgia’s Forest Land Protection Tax Incentive Program (CUVA)
  + John Pennington, Director, Beaver Watershed Alliance – Emerging Solutions and Pilot Projects: A Landowner-Guided Collaborative Approach
  + Sheryl Parsons, US Environmental Protection Agency and Kitty Weisman, consultant with US Endowment for Forestry and Communities – Funding for Source Water Protection

***Forum Outcomes and Next Steps***

Discussion time at the Forum generated thoughtful comments by many participants, and there was also a lot of productive interaction during breaks. However, some expressed frustration over the lack of rich and productive discussion. Over the course of the day, participants agreed that the Forum was an excellent beginning to a continued conversation and collaborative partnership between forestry and drinking water. Although some participants were concerned about potential additional regulation of the forestry sector, and others suggested moving forward cautiously because of a perceived lack of financial and staff resources, most participants expressed excitement about the Forum and next steps to foster the relationship between the forestry and drinking water sectors.

***City of Savannah Inspired by Forum***

An exciting outcome of the forum is City of Savannah’s interest in Graeme Lockaby’s presentation linking public health with urban watersheds. City of Savannah may ask him to do additional studies and data collection in the Savannah watershed. Also as a result of the forum, City of Savannah is considering increasing their customer outreach promoting the connection between drinking water and public health. Overall, City of Savannah staff experienced a transformation in the way they are addressing source water protection with respect to public health and forestry issues.

In addition, City of Savannah is increasing communication with Weyerhaeuser, one of the major timber users in their drinking water watershed. City staff will be touring the watershed with Weyerhaeuser foresters to review their operations and drinking water sensitivities. They will also discuss ways to combine their resources to promote forestry and drinking water needs in a public relations partnership. This work is a direct result of the forum.

***Next Steps***

Participants agreed to the following future actions to continue the momentum of the Forum:

* Consider hosting a similar Forum in Southwest Georgia, in the Flint watershed which is shared between Georgia and Alabama;
* Continue to share information by having some kind of regular communication between the forestry and drinking water sectors (such as a newsletter, email, or regular meeting);
* Conduct additional scientific research into the connection between forestry and groundwater;
* Seek better data about the relative contributions of naturally occurring contaminants versus human-caused contaminants in drinking water;
* Explore ways to increase green spaces for source water protection in urban watersheds;
* Research and share information about forestry-drinking water collaborative pilot projects, tools, and case studies (such as the City of Columbus drinking water utility relationship with Georgia Power, land use planning tools, etc.);
* Strengthen existing education and outreach programs and materials and create new ones to highlight the connection between forestry and drinking water (including speaking at relevant meetings and conferences, sharing information with the public, publishing articles in key newsletters and magazines, etc.);
* Conduct additional research on the effectiveness of forestry Best Management Practices specifically as they relate to drinking water resources;
* Seek voluntary cooperation of forest landowners to strengthen drinking water source protection (rather than imposing additional regulations or forcing cooperation);
* Conduct geographic information systems (GIS) mapping data analysis to determine priority watersheds for collaborative forestry-drinking water projects;
* Learn more about new Georgia tax programs that may lead to sale/conversion of forest lands or financial hardship of counties; foster collaborative discussions to determine alternative tax policy approaches that would favor retaining working forests.
* Follow up with Augusta and Savannah utility personnel to find out more about their experience at the forum and how they might move forward. Find out if they need assistance.

These actions will take time to implement, possibly several years. The US Endowment for Forestry and Communities and the US Forest Service have agreed to continue jointly funding the Southeastern Partnership for Forests and Water part-time contract for another year. However this contract serves five southeastern states, not just Georgia. For full implementation of the above action items, additional funding and staff time will likely be needed from a combination of federal and state grants and partner contributions.

***Lessons Learned***

Many participants provided written feedback (Appendix B). This feedback contains important clues for how to move forward with forestry and drinking water collaboration. The planning team also met after the Forum to discuss lessons learned, which included:

* The ice breaker the night before was great for introducing people to each other and the forum goals. Consider additional ways to increasing participation throughout the forum.
* To address the lack of productive discussion, consider building in more time for “table discussions” – informal one-on-one exchanges of ideas among participants.
* Consider adding a clear statement at the beginning of the forum to welcome feedback and encourage discussion.
* Also consider having one or two breakout discussions with smaller groups to encourage participation and delving into more complex ideas and issues.
* Consider having discussion sessions be more specific, with clear outcomes and objectives.
* Opening session should be clear about forum goals and expected outcomes/objectives.
* Be more forthright about financial relationship between water utilities and forest landowners.
* Have both a morning and an afternoon break – otherwise it is too long for participants to engage effectively.
* The afternoon sessions were somewhat repetitive – consider eliminating them and having break out groups for additional discussion and brainstorming.
* Once idea for afternoon discussion and breakout sessions is to have someone like Eric Echols, who is an expert in the language of collaboration, use specialized techniques to generate collaborative discussion. It may be worth paying someone to do this important work, if it will foster productive discussion. Alternatively, we could learn about the techniques ourselves and build them into our next forum.
* There may have been some misunderstanding by some of the forestry sector participants about the purpose of the forum: some may have viewed it as blaming forestry for problems with drinking water. Consider painting a more detailed and broad picture of the drinking water treatment challenge and how this relates to watershed quality and landowner practices, not just focused on forestry impacts.
* Following from the above issue, consider also adding a short session that serves as a primer from drinking water utilities on the impact of forests on drinking water – clarity, color, odor, turbidity and break down the specifics of treatment. Provide case studies to improve understanding and make it real.
* Consider future forums in other locations including Southwest Georgia.

**Appendix A**

**Forum Participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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**Appendix B**

**Participant Comments and Feedback**

***Private landowner***

I enjoyed the meeting very much, learned a lot and met several people in fields I likely would not have interacted with otherwise. Some general comments are provided below (in no particular order of importance):

* It all sounds good and likely is based in science and truth to some degree, but I have always been skeptical of claims that a $ spent in one place will result in 10$ or 50$ cost avoidance in some other loosely related area. I think it will be a hard sell to convince one taxing jurisdiction that they should spend their limited funds to pay for forest protection upstream in another area, in order to avoid water treatment expense way in the future. Not that it isn't a valid concept, but just a difficult one to implement.
* The Arkansas project seems totally dependent on using money from an outside benefactor to implement forest and land protection on a large scale upstream in the watershed.
* I had hoped to learn more about underground water use, aquifer distribution and flow, and the role of forests on recharge of aquifers in Georgia.
* I am curious if all "forests" are equal as relates to water quality, i.e. are pine forests better than hardwoods, etc.
* There were some interesting emotional comments regarding Conservation Easements that surprised me. I would think everyone in the forest industry, and especially private family landowners, would understand that CEs have a use in the overall system of protecting forests, but they may not be for everyone, and are not mandatory and do not consist of someone "taking away" an owner's property rights against their will, as a few of the comments seemed to indicate.
* Probably the biggest failure I saw in the process is not exploring in more detail what seems clearly to me to be the biggest threat to our forests (and consequently drinking water quality), namely the escalating threat today from accelerating parcelization, fragmentation, and conversion of forest land. Urbanization was discussed, but it seemed to almost be dismissed with the assessment that it was going to happen, it couldn't be stopped, and we probably needed to welcome the increase in population in Georgia. Don't get me wrong, I don't have the answers, but I do fear the outcome of all these trends.
* I think we need to address the changes in private family forest owners (FFOs) that is coming soon. This includes such drivers of change as 58% of the land in the south being owned by FFOs, and 40% of FFOs are absentee owners. >60% are >55 years old and 15% are >75 years old. The younger descendants of these long time family forest landowners are more likely to have left the land at an earlier age and have have shed their sweat, blood and tears on the soil, as their parents and grandparents likely have. This "perfect storm" likely predicts that a LOT of the current family owned forest land will come on the market in the next 5-25 years. Some the great work done by the forest industry (GFA, Richard Royal and others) to ease the annual tax burden and recent tax changes at the federal level to protect nearly $5.5 million of estate value from the death tax may help avoid having to "sell the family farm" to pay taxes, but it does nothing to keep the next generation from immediately selling the land as soon as they inherit it at highly inflated "development" value.
* I think considerable effort needs to be directed towards education in the next few years, to reach landowners to work with them on a succession plan that will retain the forests not only as forests, but without being broken up into smaller parcels.   
  This issue of parcelization has far reaching negative impact on more than drinking water quality (wildlife diversity, etc)
* I heard a good bit of discussion at the meeting about relationships, partnering, coordination, etc. This was excellent. I have seen this concept start to get traction in the past 3 or 4 years among other organizations as well. I would like to add to this movement the benefit of leveraging the resources, energy, and actions of other organizations in diverse industries, when they work to achieve common goals. A good example is linking the actions and expertise of the forest industry with wildlife conservation and game organizations. Reggie Thackston, GA DNR Private Lands Program Manager and Bobwhite Quail Initiative Coordinator, presented recently at the Gopher Tortoise Council meeting in Albany, GA and the Longleaf Alliance Conference in Mobile, AL. His talk was on Bobwhite Quail, but he told me the same thing I have been saying for years, you have to package your message in a way that is relevant to the audience you are talking to. For example, the Gopher Tortoise community may not be be big fans of the Bobwhite Quail, in fact, some of the "animal protectors" may feel shooting quail is horrible, but if you find common ground and educate people like the Gopher Tortoise folks on the benefits of frequent prescribed fire, thinning to lower the basal area, removing hardwoods to allow more sunlight to hit the ground, and couch those actions in terms of benefit to the tortoise, the quail will also benefit as much. The same goes for the Longleaf community and the deer, turkey, quail and other wildlife organizations. What I am trying to say is that if we can get educate all these diverse groups on the benefits of well managed forests, we can leverage their actions within their communities.
* I think the forest community should also continue and even increase its efforts to ensure viable future markets for wood products. I wish we could get the LEED program and Green Building Council to remove all penalties for use of wood products. We might even want to seek funding for research to challenge the base premise they use that metal, concrete and synthetic products can be more green than the ultimate renewable forest products. In this vein, maybe the forest industry could work with the engineering field to further investigate the use of wood structure for high rise building construction. This also would support the argument that forest products sequester carbon better than other options. Burning wood pellets in Europe just releases the carbon in someone else's back yard, but we all share the same atmosphere. Every wood beam enclosed in a 30 story structure sequesters the carbon indefinitely.

I heard mention of a follow up meeting in SW Georgia. Maybe it could be at the Jones Center in Baker County. They have hosted several high level working sessions over the years, some in the area of Water Quality, I think. They are very limited in the area of hotel accommodations nearby, however.  If not, maybe the Columbus Water Works might help support a meeting in Columbus. Both sites would be fairly convenient for Alabama attendees.

***Other Comments***

* Regulation, or perceived regulation would actually serve to dis-incentivize forest ownership and investment, and be counterproductive to the retaining of forest cover in the watersheds upstream of water intakes.  And I agree, there is no free money.  But potentially rate assessments on consumer utility bills could pay for some of what was talked about, and would be fair too, I think.
* The presentations were mostly good and the opportunity to establish the contacts and openly discuss the issues was valuable to both the forestry and water service communities. I think the dialogue will continue, with the assistance of some of the leadership from both Associations, to provide value to the forestry community. I also have to say that there were several in the audience that given the authority would quickly establish regulatory requirements for forested watersheds above their input structures. I am concerned that too many would like to find the magic free money source that would somehow reduce the costs for water treatment and fairly compensate everyone at fair market value for the services provided by forested watersheds.  Notwithstanding the views of some, there is no source of free money without taking it from someone else. The best we can hope to obtain is to have this group recognize the value of working forests and help us avoid the establishment of disincentives to private management. Appreciate your efforts to make this happen. Hopefully it will pay dividends as we move forward.
* I wanted to thank you again for putting together the Georgia Forests and Drinking Water Forum. I though the event was very successfully and I enjoyed meeting and learning from the many other professionals who attended the event.  If you need any additional help as you move forward, please let me know.  Below are my additional comments:

What did you like about the Forum? I enjoyed the ability to have 30-minutes discussions and brainstorming following each theme, which fostered excellent discussions relevant to the immediate topics.  I also liked the assigned table seating which allowed more interaction with people we may have not met before.

What do you think could be improved about the Forum? I understand that this was the first meeting and was meant to be very broad and a gathering of ideas.  In upcoming meetings it may be useful to have a list of specific action items that need to be accomplished, such as funding or lobbying needs, and perhaps circulate that before the meeting.  This will likely help turn ideas into actions.

* I had a great experience participating in the Forum.

What did you like about the Forum?  I like the diversity of the participants.  I attend many meetings and none bring together the diverse organizations present at this Forum.

What do you think could be improved about the Forum?  Maybe more inter-action, brainstorming among the various tables.  Several tables could have been combined to make a full table.

Is there any other feedback you would like to provide?  USDA-NRCS can provide a presentation of financial and technical assistance available.  USDA-NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to private- land users installing conservation practices to improve water quality, etc.

* Thank you for a well done job on the Savannah meeting.  I thought things turned out great.  I met tons of people and look forward to working with them on source water protection
* It was a great forum. Below are additional comments:
* The Savannah River Basin downstream of Thurmond Dam is challenged by many environmental issues. There is a Harbor TMDL for dissolved oxygen (protection of the short nose sturgeon), occurrence of salt water intrusion, a large scale Savannah Harbor deepening project, the Plant Vogtle expansion, and resource agencies discussing drought issues and the possibility of revising the Corps drought contingency plan for Thurmond. The basin has many challenges to both water quality and quantity. Addressing non-point source stressors becomes even more critical when one deals with a basin that is heavily relied on for both assimilative capacity for wastewater plants and for a regional drinking water source. Non-point source reductions (via BMP installation/land management and protection) is the next arena to enhance. What may at first seem to be small changes in the basin thru BMP installation may,  in total, result in a sizable impact on the system. The linkage between drinking water sources and forestry BMPs can assist in this effort.
* To that end, it is important to conduct research that can demonstrate how forestry BMPs can reduce non-point source pollution thru reduction of nutrient runoff, fecal, etc. Research scopes need to carefully developed with a high level of peer review. Case studies need to be done in Georgia. The resulting database can then be used in evaluating the best BMPs to apply to specific situations, and provide verification that implementation of these tools effects water quality (specific pollutant parameters) in a measureable way.
* Georgia EPD can consider forestry related BMP projects in its 319 program. Glen Behrend with EPD’s non-point source program can provide guidance if needed (404-651-8511).

* Forum was well organized and provided an excellent opportunity to begin to:  increase understanding between forest owners/managers and water service provides, and  build collaborative partnerships

What did you like about the Forum? Opportunity for interaction and willingness of most participates to listen to other perspectives.

What do you think could be improved about the Forum? Perhaps more in depth coverage of the science behind forestry BMPs and the process mechanisms that ensure compliance with state and federal BMPS.

Is there any other feedback you would like to provide? The reality that there is no magic source creating free money.  In the end the Water Service Providers & Users, Forest Landowners and Tax payers foot the bill for everything that we elect to do.

* It was a great meeting. Thanks again
* For future meetings in Georgia or other states, if possible it would be useful to have a case example of a water utility working with a forestry organization – how their efforts improved drinking water source protection. Beaver watershed example worked well for the Georgia Forum.
* Seek answers to some of the questions raised during the Forum:
  + Does drought impact water quantity/quality in forested areas differently than in non-forested areas?
  + Is there more water quality/quantity stability in forested areas during drought?
  + Explore the relationship between the State of Georgia protection of ground water aquifer recharge areas and forested areas
  + Is there a connection between what the state is protecting (for groundwater aquifer recharge) and sensitive forested areas in the watershed?