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Water

*An Alabama
Treasure*

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Water

An Alabama Treasure



Many Alabamians recognize that water is one of our most important natural resources. We expect our water to be readily available, usable in almost any amount we want, and free from pollutants. In general, Alabama's water quality compares quite favorably with the rest of the nation. A growing population, industrialization, and changing

practices in natural resource uses make it increasingly difficult to maintain the high quality of our water resources.

Recently public attention has been more keenly focused on water quality and quantity issues in Alabama. Some specific examples include the formation of monitoring groups of volunteers such as Water Watch (inland) and Bay Watch (Mobile Bay) to observe water quality conditions. The controversy surrounding the diversion of water from the Tallapoosa River to Atlanta and then into the Chattahoochee River system has made Alabama residents aware that our supply of water is becoming more limited as residential and industrial usage increases.

State and local agencies charged with assuring water quality have done a reasonably good job of controlling and reducing point source pollution such as industrial discharges, municipal sewage treatment facilities, and other site-specific discharges. However, it is not as easy to either identify or control **non-point source pollution**, which includes urban and rural runoff. If we are to maintain the quality of Alabama's watersheds, major efforts to reduce non-point source pollution are needed.

Watersheds In Alabama

We often hear the term *watershed* used in discussions about water quality. This concept recognizes the impact that actions taken miles away from streams or rivers can have on the quality of the water they contain. A watershed refers to the geographic area that drains to a common outlet such as a stream, river, lake, or bay. Not only water but sediments, chemicals, contaminants, and other dissolved materials also flow to the lower elevations and have an impact on the condition and quality of the water in the watershed.

Watersheds frequently extend beyond state lines; for example, small areas of Alabama are part of and drain to watersheds in Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida. Water from a number of other states enters Alabama's streams, rivers, and watersheds and the effects of distant actions have great impact on Alabama's water quality. Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico are the end point of the Mobile River system and therefore are affected by the accumulation of water, sediments, and pollutants from as far away as Tennessee and Georgia.

Mobile Bay

Mobile Bay is unique in Alabama because it provides a vast transition area between the fresh-water and wetland areas of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta to the north and the marine environments of the Gulf of Mexico to the south. The major fresh-water inflow comes from the Mobile River system, which has an average discharge of 62,500 cubic feet per second. In terms of discharge, the Mobile River is the fourth largest river system in the United States, ranking below only the Mississippi, Columbia, and Yukon rivers. The rivers that empty into the bay drain more than two-thirds of Alabama as well as parts of Mississippi, Tennessee, and Georgia.

All Alabama watersheds are affected by a combination of natural and man-made variables, but in the Mobile watershed and in Mobile Bay in particular this combination is even more complex than in other regions of the state. The Mobile River carries nearly 5 million tons of suspended material into the bay each year, as well as the urban, industrial, and agricultural discharges and runoff from contributory

rivers and streams in four states. Also adding to the problems of Mobile Bay are the effects of dredging and dredge material disposal activities in the bay, and local non-point sources of pollution such as runoff from farms and city streets, storm waters, and septic tank discharges.

Despite these many negative impacts, the overall quality of Mobile Bay and the waters flowing into it through the Mobile watershed may be considered as generally good, with problems in some specific areas. Residents of Mobile and Baldwin County have been both active and vocal in identifying the need for good stewardship practices in the southern portion of Alabama. State and local governments have been generally successful in finding a balance between environmental protection and economic growth.

Wildlife Resources

Mobile Bay and its delta are rich in wildlife resources that attract fishermen, hunters, and naturalists. These prime areas for overwintering water fowl regularly attract mallard, gadwall, lesser scaup, and green winged teal.

Approximately 90 percent of all fish and shellfish landed in Alabama are dependent upon the estuarine environment at some time during the crucial stages in their life cycles. These fishery resources include species such as spotted seatrout, spot, Atlantic croaker, striped mullet, Southern flounder, red drum, and Gulf menhaden, blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters, many of which are important to both recreational and commercial fisheries. The delta also provides a habitat for mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, including the American alligator and the Alabama red-bellied turtle, a species on the Federal Endangered List.

Water, Mobile Bay, And The Future

More and better information is needed so that a long-range plan for the assessment of the cumulative impacts on Mobile Bay can be developed. It is imperative that an increased level of public awareness and understanding of issues relating to the bay and to watershed management be achieved. Cooperative efforts between area educational institutions and marine and water-related agencies should be continued and enhanced.

Improvement in the methods used for long-range planning and water quality management in Alabama are currently needed. Long-range water quality planning efforts are currently underway at the state level. Citizens in all parts of the state should be aware of the importance of these efforts. You may want to contact your state senator and state representative to express your views on this topic. You can also voice your opinions on water, water quality, and related issues by contacting:

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