

Survey of Opinions of Alabama Citizens Related to Water Resources and Water Policy and Law

Submitted To:

Auburn University Water Resources Center
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Butler-Cunningham Endowment
Alabama Department of Environmental Management

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Executive Summary

In January of 2009, the Auburn University Water Resources Center, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, the Butler-Cunningham Endowment, and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management jointly commissioned the Center for Governmental Services at Auburn University to conduct a public opinion survey on water-related issues, and other environmental concerns. The primary objective of the study was to assess Alabamians' perceptions and attitudes about water resources and to inventory public opinion concerning policy issues related to the management, conservation and enhancement of Alabama's water resources. A random sample of 10,000 Alabama residents was used to contact 2,148 individuals by phone. 412 residents completed the questionnaire. This report contains the findings of that survey.

Forty-one percent of respondents were concerned about water-related problems in their communities and 67% believed there will be some kind of water problem in Alabama in the next decade (see figure 4). The most important water-related problems Alabamians anticipate are water shortages and water pollution. Forty-two percent of survey respondents reported talking with their relatives, friends or neighbors about water shortage problems in the past two years and over one-third have been subject to water restrictions (see figure 5).

Understanding how Alabamians use water and their beliefs concerning this resource was a major focus of the project. One-third of survey respondents did not try to monitor how much water they used in their households and over half could not estimate the amount of water they used on a monthly basis (see figure 7). In addition to using water for household purposes, 61% of Alabamians surveyed water their lawns and gardens (see figure 12) and 72% reported receiving their water from municipal water supply systems (see figure 13).

The Alabamians surveyed felt they had been impacted by the severe drought of 2006-07. Forty percent of survey respondents reported direct negative effects on their personal lives as a result of the drought (see figure 24). Twenty-six percent said their lawn or garden suffered and 28% said they endured water shortages/restrictions.

How to address the challenges of water resource management, especially during periods of below average rainfall, is a major topic of public debate. Most of the Alabamians surveyed indicated an interest in seeing improvements in Alabama's water policy or enforcement. Fifty-two percent of survey respondents said that Alabama's water policy and laws are inadequate or need modest improvements (see figure 30). Twenty-six percent indicated that they believe enforcement of water policy laws is lacking.

As a solution to Alabama's water problems, the largest proportion of survey respondents (35%) favored the implementation of more aggressive conservation practices (see figure 31). For the most part, respondents supported the proposed conservation policy of charging individuals and companies higher rates for water when they use more than normal amounts (see figure 43).

Over 80% of surveyed Alabamians agreed that laws and regulations should be developed to reward water conservation (see figure 44). Other policy changes that surveyed Alabamians largely supported included:

- Water uses should be prioritized and some users given preference over others during droughts (see figure 37).
- Mechanisms should be available by which government agencies could pay land owners to store water on their property for use by public water supply systems (see figure 39).
- Landowners should be required to obtain permits for impounding runoff, withdrawing water from streams, removing groundwater with wells, or diverting stream flow. (see figure 40).
- Water rights should be extended to rain falling on and water flowing across property (see figure 41).
- Water law in Alabama should specify that water storage and water use upstream must make allowance for water needs of the downstream, natural, aquatic environment (see figure 45).
- Watershed management authorities should have the power to regulate land use within a watershed to protect the quantity and quality of all surface and ground water within the watershed (see figure 47).
- Crop irrigation should be more widely used in Alabama to protect against years with abnormally low rainfall (see figure 48).

Alabamians clearly want to maintain local autonomy and flexibility regarding water resources management. They largely supported the thought that even though water policy should be developed at the state level, local officials should have the authority and autonomy to modify, implement and enforce the policy within their jurisdictions (see figure 34). Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents shared the opinion that water policy implementation and enforcement should be primarily executed by local agencies (see figure 35).

The management of water resources is just one of many issues residents are concerned about in the context of understanding the environment in general. Overall, Alabamians share the opinion that Alabama's environment is in good shape. A large majority of survey respondents rated the general quality of the environment as "good" (see figure 55). They also felt that current water quality is equal to or better than water quality 25 years ago (see figure 56), however, 49% rated the air quality as getting "dirtier" (see figure 57). Survey respondents were more concerned about water pollution than any other environmental problem facing Alabama today (see figure 65). They believe the biggest source of air pollution is automobiles and the biggest source of water pollution is industry (see figures 66 & 67).

Government oversight is one key mechanism for helping to safeguard the environment. A majority of survey respondents agreed that environmental standards protect public health and the environment, and that Alabama's environmental laws are sufficient (see figure 59). However, opinions were split about whether environmental laws are adequately enforced (see figure 61), and they mostly agree that local zoning laws are needed to address environmental impacts of development not regulated by the state (see figure 60).