

Water Wars News Summary

December, 2016

This document is intended to summarize in simple terms the status of the "Water Wars" for the members of the North Georgia Crappie Anglers Club. "Water Wars" is the name that has been applied to the long term (30 years) and still ongoing battle between the states of Georgia, Alabama and Florida over the water that flows down the Chattahoochee River and Flint River basin from Georgia to Florida.

Essentially the claim is that population and agricultural growth in Georgia has resulted in excessive Georgia water use negatively impacting Alabama and Florida. In Florida the big concern is the impact on the oyster industry which requires fresh water from the north to flow into the oyster beds of the Apalachicola Bay in order to support oyster reproduction and growth. Alabama and Florida want "equitable apportionment" of the available water flow as they view consumption by Atlanta and farmers in southwest Georgia leaves them with too little flow.

This matter has been elevated to a "special master" appointed by the U.S. Supreme Court to settle this dispute. A special master is a judge that hears all of the detailed evidence and arguments in a case. The special master sends his ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court which then reviews the ruling much like an appeals court. If they agree with the ruling, it becomes a Supreme Court ruling. Ralph Lancaster, Jr. is the appointed special master in this case. He has been hearing the arguments for the Florida and Georgia sides at a site in Portland, Maine. The legal presentations were completed on December 1. At this time he has indicated that he will make his ruling by the end of the year. His ruling will be sent to the U.S. Supreme Court which should issue their final ruling in 2017. It should be noted that Ralph Lancaster, Jr. strongly suggested that the parties settle this themselves as any ruling he makes will likely make neither party happy.

There are those who say that even a ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court may not end the water wars. The reason for potential additional conflict is that neither Alabama nor the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers were included in this case. The Corps of Engineers controls the flow of water and they are working on a new Water Control Manual for the river system. The release of their document may stir up more controversy although in Georgia's arguments they stated that the Water Control Manual issued from the federal level is supposed to balance the water needs of all parties.

Of interest to Lake Lanier fishermen will be the possible impact on future lake water levels should court ruling force faster water releases from the lake. As the lake is down around 10 feet from full pool here in December, 2016 it is a large concern should future levels were forced lower due to legal rulings. As Atlanta area is a large user of water, any limitations on water use by Atlanta could impact future development of the metro area. This could negatively impact the economy and jobs in such fields as construction in the future.