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THE STAKEHOLDER'S VOICE IN THE ACF CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT: For 20 years the states of Georgia, Florida and Alabama have been arguing through the courts and elsewhere over how the waters of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint (ACF) watershed will be used. When several law suits were consolidated into a single Multiple District Litigation (MDL) court and a federal judge with prior water resolution experience was assigned to the case, there was a sense that movement would be made in reaching a settlement. In July 2009, Judge Paul Magnuson issued his "draconian" decision (his words) that Lake Lanier above Atlanta could not be used for water supply purposes. A subsequent ruling further declared that the waters of the ACF watershed could not be used to increase flows into Apalachicola River beyond what was established as sufficient by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Given this history and frustration over numerous aspects, a small group of ACF stakeholders met in August 2008. This meeting of representatives from all three states and from numerous water interests resulted from one person calling another person and posing a question. Can the stakeholders achieve something that the political structures of the three states have not achieved, i.e. agree to an equitable sharing of the waters of the ACF watershed? From this first meeting a process evolved from the original stakeholders to become a dynamic organization of over 100 members representing large corporations, cities, counties, advocacy groups, agriculture and environmental organizations. The ACF Stakeholders has survived the first two years as a 501 c 3 organization which included a transition of officers and change in Charter and Bylaws. More important is the evolved sense of trust among the diverse stakeholders that is enabling the discussion of controversial issues. There is a growing awareness of the needs of other water interest categories in the Basin and the recognition that in order for a solution to the water conflict to be long lasting it has to recognize the needs of all stakeholders in the group. With adoption of a Sustainable Water Management Program, the organization is on the way to achieving its overall mission of enhancing management of the ACF.

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