

Connecticut State Water Plan Summary

BACKGROUND: On July 1, 2014, Public Act 14-163, “An Act Concerning the Responsibilities of the Water Planning Council,” directed the state’s Water Planning Council (WPC) to develop a State Water Plan. The WPC is comprised of representatives of the four state entities with oversight or regulatory responsibility for water management: The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), the Department of Public Health (DPH), the Office of Policy and Management (OPM), and the Public Utilities Regulatory Authority (PURA). While Connecticut has historically enjoyed plentiful, clean water, unique factors in the state have combined to emphasize the importance of the Public Act and its recommended evaluation of water management strategies in the future:

- The recent drought in 2016 raised awareness that even in Connecticut, river basins can be depleted.
- Connecticut is the only state in the U.S. that prohibits wastewater discharges to drinking water sources, preserving the highest quality water for drinking (Class A). This protects human health and helps keep treatment costs low, but the policy could, however, limit future drinking water sources.
- New state streamflow requirements downstream of water supply reservoirs are highlighting the ecological need for water, which must be balanced with other water needs.
- Future climate trends in the northeast are uncertain, and planning for adaptation is essential.

GOALS: The overarching goal of the Plan, as defined by stakeholders who participated in the workshops as designated representatives of broad water interests, has been to “**Balance the use of water to meet all needs.**” The Plan aims to protect water quantity and quality for all of its current and future instream and out-of-stream uses when regulations, climate, and economic conditions are changing. These goals, as well as the recommendations in the Plan, were grounded in the enabling statute, and formulated by stakeholders from across the state representing various interests in water; public and private water utilities, environmental and watershed advocacy groups, agriculture, industry/energy, wastewater, land planning, golf courses, academia, and water science professionals.

USING THE PLAN: The Plan provides technical information and guiding principles that may be used to inform decisions across the state or on a case-by-case basis. The Plan does not attempt to prioritize any particular water use or water use category over others. Likewise, specific uses of water, if currently authorized by state law and regulation, are neither advocated nor diminished relative to other uses. The Plan’s information may be used by lawmakers to formulate new legislation, by regulators to adapt water and land regulations to changing needs and conditions, and by the Water Planning Council to inform decisions and recommend legislation.

To comply with the statute’s goal of collecting and applying scientific data, the Plan includes maps and data summary sheets on each of the state’s 44 regional river basins and compares water that is naturally available in each basin to the growing needs for water in and out of the streams. Examples are included in the Executive Summary and Section 3 on how to properly and cautiously use these screening tools. Additionally, the policy recommendations in the Plan are intended to provide a basis for legislation, regulations, and situational decisions that **consistently apply the views of stakeholders** across the state.

5 MOST IMPORTANT MESSAGES IN THE PLAN:

The Water Planning Council has interpreted the primary messages of the Plan as follows:

- **PLAN FUNCTION:** The Plan is not an answer, but a platform for consistent, informed decision making.
- **MAINTAIN HIGHEST QUALITY DRINKING WATER:** The Plan reaffirms the state’s dedication to the highest standard of drinking water quality in the nation (Class A).
- **BALANCE:** Many river basins in Connecticut cannot satisfy all instream and out-of-stream needs all the time. The Plan offers ideas for understanding and improving this balance.
- **CONSERVATION:** While Connecticut leads the nation in protections of drinking water quality, the State lags in its water conservation ethic. Outreach that builds on utility initiatives is one of the most important recommendations in this Plan.
- **MAINTAIN SCIENTIFIC DATA:** The plan advocates for the collection and use of scientific data, as well as centralized access to it.

KEY TECHNICAL FINDINGS: The following observations summarize key interpretations of the available scientific data included in the Plan.

- Many river basins have enough water to satisfy both instream (ecological, recreation) and out-of-stream (drinking, industry, agriculture, energy) needs most of the time, but they cannot all supply these needs during drought, or even typical summer conditions.
- Most water diversions in Connecticut were grandfathered from permitting through a registration process. Registered volumes do not necessarily represent actual overallocation of water as many remain unused or underutilized. Although there may be practical limitations to using their maximum capacity, full use of some unused registrations as authorized could put rivers in jeopardy of not meeting all instream and out-of-stream needs.
- There are opportunities to enhance the water conservation ethic for public and private water supply in Connecticut in cooperation with many initiatives already advocated by water utilities.
- Climate change is likely to have a significant effect on potential flooding in Connecticut, and could also result in drier summers in the next 25 years. More work is recommended on coastal impacts, longer-term effects (50 – 100 years), and basins at risk of not satisfying all future needs.
- Simulation modeling can be effective in future evaluation of potential new water policies or strategies within specific basins (as shown with a demonstration).

TOP TEN CONSENSUS-BASED POLICY

PRIORITIES: Broad consensus was reached on the following top policy recommendations in the Plan, which can serve as guiding principles for legislation, regulations, and water planning.

1. Water management should follow scientific examples.
2. As possible, remove obsolete water registrations.
3. Encourage innovation in agricultural water practices.
4. Water data (or access to it) should be centralized in a single database and/or portal to other sources.
5. Consider Class B Water for individual non-potable uses if environmentally prudent and cost-effective, using guidelines to be developed by the WPC using the Triple Bottom Line metrics (environmental, social, economic).
6. Develop an education and outreach strategy focusing on water conservation topics.
7. The WPC should provide ongoing review of other Connecticut state plans in order to identify and address inconsistencies.
8. Encourage regional water solutions where they are practical and beneficial.
9. Reaffirm support for the protection of Class I and II land contributing to water supply. Expand protections to other watershed lands and land that feed aquifers used for public water supply or by private wells.
10. Create a data-based water education program aimed at the general public and municipal officials.

In addition to these top priorities, the Plan includes many more policy recommendations that are formulated based on stakeholder consensus, as well as recommended next steps for issues that require further study or deliberation.

FUTURE ROLES OF THE WATER PLANNING COUNCIL:

To date, the Water Planning Council has been tasked by statute to oversee the development of the State Water Plan. To effectively implement the Plan by promoting consistent use of its data and recommendations, the WPC has proposed that its future roles may include:

- Early Review of Proposed Water Legislation
- Developing proposed legislation as needed
- Hiring a Water Plan “Chief” to serve as a liaison between the WPC, public, and legislature.
- Conflict avoidance and resolution through mediation or arbitration (binding or non-binding)
- Seeking and securing funding for implementation
- Prioritizing and initiate next steps