

TN H2O Plan Goal: Ensure State's Good Water 'Abundance' For Future - Tennessean

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A group of Tennessee's outdoors leaders sat at a table surrounded by nature on state land previously owned by a prominent Dickson County resident.

The topic of discussion was a resource officials repeatedly said is often taken for granted: Water.

Though Tennessee and Dickson County are in good shape with water, both in amount and quality, state leaders, particularly Gov. Bill Haslam, want to keep it that way.

Among the attendees at 238-acre Buffalo Ridge Refuge included former landowner Tom Beasley, of Burns, as well as Deputy Gov. Jim Henry; Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency Executive Director Ed Carter; Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Commissioner Dr. Shari Meghreblian; and state Rep. Michael Curcio, of Dickson.

"You can only mess this up one time," Henry told the group Tuesday on the TWRA's Humphreys County land, which adjoins another state-owned 1,500 acres, also owned formerly owned by Beasley.

"If you let a company come into the wrong place or you pollute a river, try cleaning it up afterward. You are talking about a 75-year problem," Henry added.

The TN H2O plan development was launched in January with completion scheduled for October.

When asked about possible specific actions or guidelines the TN H2O plan would set statewide, TDEC spokesperson Eric Ward said it was too early in the group-meeting process to know.

Ward did say the plan steering committee members have learned there several variations in water data collection methods statewide among water utilities.

"Working groups (made up of Tennessee's water utilities' leaders) may consider a solution for how to make data across the various groups more consistent, resulting in better collaboration when issues arise," Ward said.

Haslam started TN H2O in response to the state's growing number of residents — the population is estimated to double in 50 years — as well as concerns over use of the Memphis Sands Aquifer, droughts impacting local communities, failures of some wastewater infrastructure, and interstate battles over water rights.

Meghreblian said the state is "blessed" with its "abundance of water" and noted that the TN H2O plan is therefore "not a reactionary kind of initiative..."

She cited other Southern states that have run out of water in areas and said TN H2O is "a proactive way to ensure that as we continue to grow in both population and economy, that we are always going to have an abundance of water."

She admitted this isn't the first time a group has tried to assemble a statewide water plan.

"But the difference is, this time around, is that we have leadership and support from the top," said Meghreblian, pointed to Henry and Haslam's involvement. "That really is the difference at the end of the day."

The plan will include an assessment of water resources and recommendations to help ensure Tennessee has water resources to support future population and economic growth. Public input will be accepted in October once the plan is in place.

TN H2O will focus on surface and groundwater, water and wastewater infrastructure, water reuse and land conservation, as well as institutional and legal framework. TDEC is overseeing the development of TN H2O.

The plan's steering committee members include Henry, Meghreblian, Carter and Department of Tourism Commissioner Kevin Triplett.

'Ways to work together'

Deputy Gov. Jim Henry presents Tom Beasley with a state certificate of recognition from Gov. Bill Haslam for Beasley's work to preserve the state's wilderness and wildlife. (Photo: Chris Gadd/The Herald)

Henry said various water plans already exist around the state "but no one has brought them together."

Adding to that comment, Meghreblian said “we have to figure out ways to work together.”

When the discussion turned to rural water utilities, Triplett said often the municipalities are stuck in a “which do you do first” situation. He said the utilities or municipalities “are in a situation where they can’t take any more (water) loads because their infrastructure is too old and they don’t have the money to do it.”

“But you need the development,” Triplett added. “But you can’t do the development without the infrastructure.”

He said it’s hard to convince some citizens a rate hike is a good investment to improve infrastructure.

Curcio, who was at the event, said he was excited about the plan because it seems that “not only are (rural communities) a part of this plan...but they are a feature of it.”

Dickson County has a connection to the plan with the inclusion of Water Authority of Dickson Executive Director Michael Adams who is part of the TN H2O Infrastructure working group.

“It’s been a pleasure to be part of this,” Henry said. “I think future Tennesseans are going to have a plan they can live by and stay on track.”from Tennessean