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Sparta Aquifer Recovery: Sherrel Johnson (Union County Water Conservation Board) Presentation to the Arkansas Bar Association Environmental Law Section

Arkansas Environmental, Energy, and Water Law Blog

09/19/2016

Allocating or supplementing available water resources is not an issue limited to California or the Western United States.

Portions of Arkansas face similar deficits.

Ms. Sherrel Johnson of the Union County Water Conservation Board ("Board"), undertook a presentation at the September 13th meeting of the Environmental Law Section of the Arkansas Bar Association titled:

Sparta Aquifer Recovery

South Arkansas & North Louisiana

We're not California – but we Coulda' Been

or Problem Solving Through Practical Application of Public Policy

Ms. Johnson serves as Grant & Special Projects Manager of the Board and was President and Chief Executive Officer for the El Dorado, Arkansas Chamber of Commerce from 1995-2000.

The presentation addressed a critical water resource issue in Southeast Arkansas and North Louisiana. This included the efforts over the past twenty years to ensure adequate water supplies for the area's various water users.

Ms. Johnson's presentation provided an overview of the critical groundwater resource in the area (i.e., the Sparta Aquifer) and the research (including significant monitoring efforts) undertaken to determine the reasons for declining groundwater levels. Further, she addressed the work in Union County to compensate for the reductions in the availability of this critical resource.

The presentation covered:

- Arkansas's critical groundwater areas
- Reliance of Union County on the Sparta Aquifer and the research that concluded in 1996 that it was declining rapidly
- Sparta Aquifer monitoring efforts

- Findings that Union County must reduce Sparta groundwater consumption by 72% from 21 million gallons per day to 7 million gallons per day in five years or less or risk inflicting irreparable damage on the aquifer
- Union County's determination that solving the Sparta Aquifer issue was its number one economic development priority
- Development of Arkansas legislation in 1999 that would provide an entity with authority to manage the Sparta Aquifer and generate funding
- Personnel involved in the previously referenced effort activities from 1997 to 1999 involving:
 - Union County Water Reliance (including funding source)
 - El Dorado Chamber of Commerce
 - Various Agreements
 - Preliminary Work
 - Education
 - Legislation

The county-wide recognition of the need to address this issue was likely driven by the fact that seven cities, 29 rural associations and 11 major industries were utilizing the Sparta Aquifer as a raw water source.

The previously referenced efforts resulted in the formation of the Union County Water Conservation Board. This Board has 11 elected members representing 11 separate political subdivisions within Union County. Following its formation in 1999, the Board began the process of regulating groundwater use in Union County. These actions included implementation of a usage fee for groundwater users. The usage fee provided revenues to fund a Water System Plan and other activities. Acquisition of water from the Ouachita River to supply industries was deemed an option for eliminating their need to access groundwater.

The presentation also addressed a discussion of how the Sparta Aquifer replenishes itself and the development of the Ouachita River Alternative Water Supply Project (WSP). Ms. Johnson noted that the WSP constituted a 65 million dollar investment of infrastructure which was funded from federal, state and local (88%) sources. Also discussed was the South Arkansas Sparta Aquifer Recovery Initiative Monitoring Well Network and some of the results. A water clarification facility and current expansion were also addressed.

[A copy of the slides from the presentation can be downloaded here.](#)