

# Responsive Management



## **Understanding the Georgia Public's Perception of Water Issues and the Motivational Messages to Which They Will Respond:**

### **Focus Group Findings**

**Conducted for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources**

**June 2003**

**Conducted by Responsive Management**

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**Responsive Management National Office**

Mark Damian Duda, Executive Director  
Peter E. De Michele, Ph.D., Director of Research  
William Testerman, Director of Survey Center  
Carol Zurawski, Research Associate  
Martin Jones, Research Associate  
Joy Yoder, Research Associate  
Alison Lanier, Business Manager  
Steven J. Bissell, Ph.D., Qualitative Research Associate  
Ping Wang, Ph.D., Quantitative Research Associate  
James B. Herrick, Ph.D., Research Associate

130 Franklin Street  
Harrisonburg, VA 22801  
Phone: 540/432-1888 Fax: 540/432-1892  
Email: [mdduda@rica.net](mailto:mdduda@rica.net)  
[www.responsivemanagement.com](http://www.responsivemanagement.com)

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## **Introduction**

This report highlights the major findings from three preliminary focus groups conducted by Responsive Management for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (Georgia DNR) in May 2002. These focus groups are part of a larger study to understand the Georgia public's perception of water issues and the motivational messages to which they will respond in a water messaging campaign. All of the focus groups were conducted with randomly selected members of the general population. One focus group was conducted in Savannah, Georgia, one focus group was conducted in Albany, Georgia, and the final focus group was conducted in Atlanta, Georgia. The purposes of these focus groups were to obtain qualitative data about attitudes and opinions toward water resource issues in Georgia, including water quantity and water quality, to gauge the general public's willingness to adopt specific water conservation measures, and to explore the types of messages that could be used by the Georgia DNR in a water messaging campaign.

These focus groups were conducted prior to the administration of the quantitative survey so that initial qualitative data could be used in the design of the survey instrument. Focus groups are used to gather preliminary data and explore issues so that a comprehensive survey instrument can be designed.

Focus groups are an important method to explore issues and test messages because they allow for extensive probing, follow-up questions, group discussion, and observation of emotional reaction to various issues and messages – aspects that cannot be measured in a traditional telephone or mail survey. Focus group research is considered qualitative research. Qualitative research sacrifices reliability for validity. This means that although focus group findings cannot be replicated statistically as can sample surveys (high reliability), they provide researchers with the opportunity to uncover salient issues (high validity).

All of the focus groups were recorded on audiotape for analysis. The Atlanta focus group was also recorded on videotape. Analysis of the focus groups is a three-step process. The moderator records observations of the focus groups during the actual focus group discussion. The tapes are

then reviewed and transcribed, and the tapes are again reviewed during the analysis and writing of the report. Quotations are always written verbatim, unless otherwise noted, and are written in *italics* to differentiate them from the text.

## **Major Findings**

- **Overall, the focus group participants were concerned about environmental and natural resource issues affecting the State of Georgia. However, there was a much higher level of concern for local issues affecting one's own community. These focus group findings initially suggest that a water conservation campaign may be more effective if it is linked to local community issues.**

The focus group discussions began with a general question regarding the most important environmental or natural resource issues affecting the State of Georgia. The focus group participants named several issues that they felt were important, including air pollution, water pollution, waste storage (including landfills filling up), and urban sprawl/over-development. Although the focus group participants expressed concern about statewide issues affecting Georgia, they tended to steer the discussion toward issues affecting their own town or community. For example, although participants in the Savannah focus group were concerned about statewide water and air pollution, the Savannah focus group participants were much more concerned about the health of the marshes, which is impacting their local blue crab and shrimp fisheries. These issues are naturally more salient to a coastal community than an inland community. The participants in the Atlanta focus group, in contrast, showed the most concern about water quality, which was driven by the taste of the local drinking water. Several participants expressed a dislike for the chlorinated taste of the drinking water. The chlorination in the water appeared to elevate the Atlanta focus group participants' concern over the quality of their city's drinking water.

These initial focus group findings suggest that a water resource awareness and conservation campaign may be more effective if it links statewide water resource issues with local community issues. The focus groups suggested that individuals are much more likely to be concerned about broader environmental issues affecting the entire state if they realize that these issues also impact them locally. If residents are informed about water conservation initiatives that they should be taking, they may be more motivated to change their behavior to help conserve water if they are informed about how water conservation will impact their own community in a positive way.

- **Although water resource issues affecting the State of Georgia were important to focus group participants, water *quantity* was not as salient of an issue as water *quality*.**

Findings from the focus groups suggest that Georgia residents are concerned about water resource issues in their state. However, there was a much higher level of concern over the *quality* of water, rather than the *quantity* of water. Several individuals felt that Georgia's rivers and streams are not very healthy. The Chatahoochee River was often named as an example of an unhealthy river because of its "brown" color and questionable swimming conditions. As previously mentioned, the participants in the Atlanta focus group were concerned about water quality because of the chlorine taste of the municipal drinking water. Focus group participants appeared to be concerned about water quality because of situations they personally could see or experience – i.e, they can see the color of the waterways and taste the chlorination in the water.

When pressed further, the focus group participants acknowledged that the previous year's drought had caused water quantity problems, but there was still an element of skepticism about how serious the quantity problem actually is. This is likely due in part because, aside from times of drought, water quantity problems are not as visible as water quality problems. For example, even though water is a limited resource, Georgia residents have never experienced actually running out of water. Reservoir levels might have dropped and watering restrictions were in place, but water was still available for consumption.

These initial focus group findings suggest that a water resource awareness and conservation campaign may be more effective if water quality issues are related to water quantity issues. For example, all of the focus group participants could relate to the need to maintain, protect, and improve drinking water quality. Drinking water is a resource used by everyone, and problems with drinking water have high visibility. Residents can tell when their drinking water is highly chlorinated, and any time there is a threat to the drinking water supply or the possibility of contamination, there is high media visibility. A water resource awareness and conservation campaign can possibly build on state residents' concern about water quality while at the same time encouraging residents to adopt water conservation measures.

*I believe we have plenty of water. This time of year it's going to be low [the water levels are going to be low].*

- **Many of the focus group participants felt that there is enough water to meet the needs of the state, but that the problem resides with how water is *supplied*. There was a very real concern about mismanagement of the water supply by the state government.**

Findings from the focus groups suggest that there is a relatively high level of skepticism regarding how water is managed and supplied by the state. Most of the focus group participants understood the cyclical nature of droughts and, therefore, felt that during times of adequate rainfall, the state should be doing more to store water. The focus group participants felt that the state should be building more storage structures so that water can be more effectively captured and distributed during times of drought. Several individuals mentioned the activities of the Army Corps of Engineers on the Chatahoochee River, including letting water through to allow the passage of large ships. This was especially bothersome to the focus group participants because they felt that water was being lost in unnecessarily large volumes. Several participants also mentioned the large quantities of water used by industries. A water resource awareness and conservation campaign should take into consideration the skepticism of some of the state residents regarding management of the state's water supply.

*I think there aren't enough storage facilities for water to store when it rains so that we can have enough during times of drought.*

*The government isn't doing enough [to help conserve water].*

*Why are they building waterfalls downtown when they are making us pay for water? The city isn't doing its part to conserve water.*

A water resource awareness and conservation campaign may be more effective if it emphasizes the fact that water is a limited resource and that the state is doing all that it can to store and supply water. Findings from the focus groups suggest that the residents may need to be informed that water quantity is a real and potentially serious problem affecting the state. Residents may

need to be more informed about the real need for water conservation measures and may need to be convinced that the state is not mismanaging its water supply. Upon verification by the quantitative survey, residents may be motivated to conserve water if they feel comfortable that the water quantity issue is not due to mismanagement by the state.

- **There appears to be a general distrust of the state government. The focus group participants felt that the state does not always set a good example for the public. For example, homeowners are encouraged to conserve water, yet many focus group participants reported seeing commercial and government establishments using sprinkler systems to water their grass while it was raining.**

The focus groups demonstrated a general distrust of the state government, especially regarding its regulation and enforcement of water conservation measures. Numerous individuals in the focus groups consistently mentioned their displeasure regarding the exemption of commercial properties and businesses from the watering restrictions that were placed on individuals and homeowners. On various occasions, the focus group participants reported seeing commercial and government establishments running their sprinkler systems while it was raining. This was viewed in a very negative light and caused a majority of focus group participants to question the need for individual homeowners to comply with the watering restrictions. Homeowners in the focus groups wondered why they should have to conserve water when the state did not seem to be making efforts to conserve water and set good examples for the public.

*The other day I saw a business that had its sprinklers on while it was raining!*

*I don't think the new watering restrictions would make a difference, especially with the commercial properties using so much water. If the commercial properties are still watering their lawns all the time, the restrictions won't make a big difference because regular people don't water their lawns like that.*

Preliminary findings from the focus groups suggest that Georgia residents may need strong reinforcements that their water conservation efforts are “worth it.” For example, numerous focus group participants indicated their displeasure with an incident that occurred with current recycling programs – that homeowners were taking the time to separate recyclables, only to later be informed that a large percentage of recycling actually ends up in a landfill. The Georgia

public may need to be reassured that if they take the effort to conserve water, the state government or other entities will not blatantly waste water.

The implication from these focus group findings is that the public may need strong reassurance that corporate and government establishments and industries are being monitored to avoid such blatant displays of water use in times when conservation measures are in place. Or, at the very least, a water resource awareness and conservation campaign may need to have a component designed to educate the public as to why corporate entities were exempt from the watering restrictions. It may be difficult to establish buy-in to a water conservation campaign if the public is not convinced that the state is also doing its part by working with corporations and industry to reduce water consumption, rather than forcing homeowners to shoulder the entire conservation burden.

- **There is a general understanding that individual actions can affect water quality and water quantity, but the focus group participants overall felt that industry and large corporations contribute more to water resource problems than do individual homeowners. It did not appear that people generally think about the impact of the *collective* actions of homeowners on water quantity and water quality.**

When the focus groups were asked what they felt were the major sources of water quantity and water quality problems in Georgia, the consensus was that industry and agriculture were both the biggest users and polluters of water. As the discussion progressed, a few individuals acknowledged that some homeowners were guilty of wasting water, but by far, they felt that homeowners contributed negligibly to water consumption and pollution compared to industry and agriculture.

It appears that the public may be interested in viewing or receiving facts about how homeowners as a group compare to industry and agriculture regarding water use. If individuals realized that the water usage of their neighborhood equates to the water usage of a larger entity, such as a corporate farm, they may be more likely to realize that homeowners, collectively, can make a difference in water conservation efforts. It appears that the problem resides in the homeowner's

perception that he/she, as an individual, can do little to make enough of a difference in terms of water conservation. The public needs to see and understand how they can truly make a difference in water conservation efforts, and that the public uses a significant amount of water.

- **Overall, there is a general lack of information available to the public about how individuals can take measures to conserve water. In general, the focus group participants demonstrated that people are willing to participate in conservation practices once they know what they can do.**

The focus group participants were generally unaware of water conservation measures they could take. Aside from basic measures, such as watering their lawn/garden less often and taking shorter showers, the focus group participants were generally unaware of specific measures, such as the use of fixtures such as showerheads or low-flow toilet devices that help conserve water. However, once they were informed about various measures and behaviors, they expressed an interest in becoming involved. Overall, the focus group participants cared about the water resource in Georgia and expressed interest in learning more about what they could do. Although a few focus group participants were not overly concerned about water quantity issues in Georgia, the majority of participants acknowledged that they, as citizens, should do their part to help conserve water.

*I'm concerned about water resources, but all I hear about is what is in the newspaper. We all have limited information.*

*I don't know what we could do. I would like to know what we could do as citizens.*

Initial findings from the focus groups suggest that a water resource awareness and conservation campaign may need to focus on making information readily available to the public regarding water conservation measures. Several focus group participants mentioned that information could be included with a homeowner's water bill. The focus group participants also suggested including "water saving tips" that could be implemented to help conserve water as well as to help the homeowner save money on his/her water expenses.

- **Findings from the focus groups suggest that the statewide plan on water conservation should be made available to the public. The general perception is that the state does not have a comprehensive plan to address the state's water resource issues. Homeowners want to know how they, as individuals, fit into the overall plan to conserve water in Georgia.**

Many of the focus group participants were interested in gaining a better understanding of exactly how water conservation measures adopted by homeowners fit into the overall statewide water conservation plan.

*The state should always have a plan ready for drought.*

The focus groups suggested that the Georgia public is interested in learning more about the statewide water conservation plan that documents how each major entity (industry, homeowners, state government, etc.) uses water, and how each group will be expected to find ways to conserve water. This plan could be posted on the Internet, and the public could be notified of its availability through an announcement that accompanies a monthly water bill. Initial findings from the focus groups also suggest that the public may be interested in receiving a shortened version of the statewide plan – i.e., a concise form of the plan that explains everything in a several short statements.

- **The focus group participants expressed an interest in receiving feedback about how their water conservation efforts are working.**

In addition to understanding how the water conserving actions of individual homeowners fit into a statewide water conservation plan, the focus groups suggested that the public may have an interest in receiving feedback about the success or failure of their efforts. Findings from the focus groups suggest that Georgia residents may be very supportive of publicized information about the contributions that homeowners/individuals are making to water conservation efforts.

- **Initial focus group findings suggest that the water resource awareness and conservation campaign should consider finding ways to bring information about water conservation and water quality issues to K-12 educators so that people can become more informed about these issues at a younger age.**

The focus group participants felt that education should be a key component of outreach efforts designed to raise awareness levels and change behaviors to help conserve water in Georgia. Several focus group participants mentioned their own educational experiences and how those experiences affected their propensity to be more conservation-minded. For example, one participant said that her middle school science teacher emphasized the need to conserve water, and showed the students measures they could take around the house to help conserve water. This knowledge was instilled in the focus group participant at a very young age, and she said that she still takes measures to conserve water at home whenever she can.

*Private citizens can make a difference. I know a lot of people that do things to conserve water. I had a science class that taught me about water conservation. Showers only need to be five or ten minutes long. The teacher told us not to flush the toilet unless you really need to. She said to wash the car when the temperature is cooler so that the water won't evaporate as fast.*

A successful campaign might provide packets of information to teachers or select a representative from the agency to make presentations at schools. If conservation behaviors become habitual, individuals will be more likely to continue practicing these behaviors, as well as teach their own children about water conservation. Children as young as kindergarten can learn how to conserve water by not letting the water run while they brush their teeth, or taking short showers instead of a bath.

- **Findings from the focus groups suggest that individuals are likely to adopt water conservation measures and change their behavior to help improve water quality for personal reasons. A campaign that highlights reasons to conserve water such as personal health, personal cost-savings and acting on behalf of one's own future generations may encourage people to change their behaviors.**

When the focus group participants were asked to discuss reasons why they currently practice water conservation behaviors or what would motivate them to adopt conservation measures, cost-savings was at the top of almost everyone's list. Most of the focus group participants said that they would be willing to install water conserving fixtures or install in-ground irrigation systems if it meant that they would save money on their water bill. Most of the individuals were even willing to spend money up-front for guaranteed savings in the long run. Willingness to spend money up-front will, of course, depend upon an individual's economic situation and whether or not he or she is even able to afford to spend money up-front. The quantitative survey that will follow these focus groups will be able to provide more insight into this factor, because data analysis will take into account demographic characteristics and willingness to adopt certain conservation measures. Even if some people cannot afford to install fixtures or in-ground irrigation systems, they too can have a positive impact by taking shorter showers, watering their lawn less often, or practicing xeriscaping (drought-resistant landscaping). The public needs to be informed that everyone, regardless of economic status, can do something to save water and that every small action, when taken collectively, can have substantial impacts on water conservation initiatives.

*Cost keeps popping into my head. I want to know if I'm going to save any money.*

In addition to cost savings, a water resource awareness and conservation campaign may need to appeal to the emotional side of the public – conserving water for future generations, children, personal health reasons, or simply because it is the “right thing to do.”

*I would act on behalf of everyone's future children. If we don't do something about it [water conservation], we won't have anything left for future generations. It seems like we keep consuming but don't put anything back.*

*I think most of us in this room are motivated to conserve water because all we have control over is ourselves.*

*If you want your water like you want your freedom, you have to conserve it.*

*Water is one of the most important resources, and people need to know it is limited and, therefore, we need to make an effort to improve water quality and water quantity. We*

*need to work together to maximize the use of our resource. It is something we can no longer take for granted.*

- **To create buy-in to a water conservation campaign, findings from the focus groups suggest that homeowners may need to be presented with facts on how their water consumption compares to industry and other entities.**

Findings from the focus groups suggest that homeowners in general do not think that they are contributing significantly to water consumption, compared to entities such as industry and agricultural operations. This is an important barrier that the campaign may need to overcome to be successful. State residents must first be made aware that there is a water quantity problem in Georgia, and then they must be moved from general awareness to action. This shift cannot occur unless homeowners truly understand that their collective action leads to significant water consumption. Perhaps one of the more important tactics a water resource awareness and conservation campaign can take is to present the public with quantitative facts demonstrating the water usage of homeowners compared to industry, commercial properties, and agricultural operations.

- **In general, the focus group participants were most supportive of conservation pricing as a means to encourage the public to conserve water.**

When the focus group participants were presented with various incentives that could be used to encourage them to conserve water, the idea of conservation pricing was most supported. Overall, the focus group participants felt that this incentive was the most fair because people would be penalized for using too much water and rewarded for using less than their projected amount. The focus group participants were most supportive of this incentive because it allows individuals to have some freedom when and how they use their water, even though they technically have a limited amount. Residents were not very supportive of the watering restrictions because of the inconvenience of the times when they could and could not water their lawn. Some of the focus group participants were concerned about the accuracy of projected water use for different sized families, but in general, if the focus group participants felt

comfortable that these numbers were accurate, they would support this conservation incentive. If this type of policy is implemented, the public may benefit from receiving small brochures along with their water bill that explains how the conservation pricing method would work.

- **Although many of the focus group participants felt that the general public is unaware of many of the issues discussed in this report, they also believed that most people would consider changing their behavior if they were presented with options, frequently reminded of the options, the options were convenient, and they understood the rationale behind the options.**

Overall, findings from the focus groups suggest that Georgia residents care about water resources in their state and can likely be motivated to conserve water if: 1) they are educated and receive more information about water conservation measures they can take, 2) they understand how their water conservation actions are part of an overall plan, 3) they feel that there is equity in conservation efforts such that state and commercial interests are also doing their part to conserve water, 4) they can save money on their water bill, 5) they understand how individuals and homeowners can make a real difference in water conservation efforts, and 6) they are provided feedback on how their actions are making a difference.

As the water resource awareness and conservation campaign develops, what should potentially be kept in mind is that some members of the Georgia population do not think that water quantity is an issue of concern to the state. Initial findings from the focus groups suggest that the campaign may need to focus on raising awareness about the need to conserve water, educating the public about what they can do to conserve water, and providing a feedback mechanism to the public.

*Education is what is needed. A lot of people don't know what they can do [to conserve water]. You have to explain to people what they can do, and what their actions will do in the long run. The DNR might want to come out with a piece in the paper, like a 3-part series.*