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PRESS RELEASE

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$49.8 Million Investment in Agricultural Water Infrastructure Will Bolster Regional Economy and Protect Streams in Southwest Georgia

Albany, GA Georgia Governor Brian P. Kemp, joined by members of the Water and Sewer Infrastructure Committee and state leaders, have awarded the Albany State University (ASU) Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources a preliminary grant award under the American Rescue Plan Act of $49.8 million. The Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development Council will also play an important role in project implementation.

"Agriculture water infrastructure is an integral part of Southwest Georgia's economy and the sustainability of the community. We are elated that our partnership with Georgia Environmental Protection Division has received official approval to move forward with a project that will be sure to enhance the lives of our community members and students for generations," said ASU President Marion Ross Fedrick. "I am proud that ASU has the opportunity to participate in this endeavor through the Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center."

This grant will fund the conversion of surface water irrigation in Southwest Georgia to deep groundwater sources. Reducing the surface water use, particularly in times of drought, will improve water supply security and protect the rivers and streams of the Lower Flint River Basin. The project will make the region more resilient to drought and sustain its economy, natural systems, and communities.

"Agricultural irrigation is the lifeblood of the economy of Southwest Georgia. This project is a giant step forward in water management that will have economic and environmental impacts that benefit this region for generations," said Mark Masters, Director of the Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center.

Over the last 20 years, multiple severe droughts have created uncertainty over water supplies and threatened the viability of the agricultural economy and natural systems, particularly in the in the region's Lower Flint River Basin. This project will restore and protect these waters to the benefit of farmers and natural systems in the region, while providing farmers with more reliable water supplies. Water resource planning and assessment in the region indicates that deeper aquifers can support more use, but this project will not assume deeper aquifers are unlimited resources. The project will assess the sustainability of increased use of these aquifers through monitoring and modeling.

Anna Truszczynski, Watershed Protection Branch Chief with the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, said about the project, “This project will not only enhance the region’s capacity to respond to drought, but it will also provide the State with important information about our deeper aquifers that will support sustainable water management decisions.”

Highly efficient irrigation systems are found on over 93% of the irrigated acreage in the Lower Flint region, and famers employ a host of other water conservation practices. However, greater investments are needed to prepare for severe droughts and protect the region’s unique aquatic ecosystems. “This project will completely change how many farmers that I know use water. We want to protect and sustain this region – its water, its people – and we’ll be able to do that much better now,” said Jimmy Webb, a farmer from Calhoun County.

Converting irrigation withdrawals to deep aquifers is recommended by the water planning councils active in this region, including the Lower Flint-Ochlockonee Regional Water Council. Council Chairman Richard Royal, said “This project will greatly enhance our ability to provide water for all needs in our region. We are pleased to see the Council’s recommendation become a reality.”

In addition to installing approximately 242 deep aquifer wells in Southwest Georgia, this project will also support conservation planning at each participating farm, environmental monitoring and assessment of groundwater aquifers and aquatic ecosystems, and stakeholder-driven water resource and endangered species management planning. It will also enhance an existing flow augmentation system near Colquitt Georgia and install a new flow augmentation system in another part of the Lower Flint River Basin. These augmentations systems provide flows to important aquatic habitats during drought.

The benefits of this project will accrue to a region that includes 27 counties with a population of approximately 590,000 people. Farming accounts for 24% of the regional economy and over 70% of the water use in the region. The project budget includes $49.8 million in federal funds and $3.7 in local matching investments.

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