

## Alabama Water Management Plan Stakeholder Input of Kelly M. Stephens, President – Neely Henry Lake Association

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I am Kelly Stephens, president of the Neely Henry Lake Association. Our association is very interested in, and supports the development of, an equitable state-wide water resource management plan for Alabama. A healthy Coosa River and Neely Henry Lake are critical to the economic viability of the communities that surround the lake. This includes, in no particular order, the cities of Gadsden, Rainbow City, Southside, Hokes Bluff, Glencoe, and Ohatchee, as well as the counties of Etowah, Calhoun and St. Clair. In recognition of the importance of the lake to our community, the Neely Henry Lake Association hosted a Water Management Plan Stakeholder Input Meeting on October 25, 2012 in Southside, Alabama. Participants in the meeting included Lance LeFleur and Lynn Sisk of ADEM, state senator Phil Williams, state representative Becky Nordgren, Brett Johnson representing state representative Craig Ford, local mayors and commissioners, local business leaders, and members of the Neely Henry Lake Association as well as representatives of the Weiss Lake Improvement Association and the Logan Martin Lake Protection Association. Represented at the meeting were the interests of the approximately 400,000 residents of the five counties that border the reservoirs of Neely Henry, Weiss and Logan Martin. What follows are my comments that I conveyed at the meeting.

Governor Bentley charged the Alabama state water agencies and the Alabama Water Agencies Working Group with drafting a state-wide water resource management plan by December of 2013. It is imperative that Alabama develop a water management plan if the state is to effectively negotiate and/or litigate water issues with our neighboring states. It is envisioned that the plan will be a science-based, data-driven plan that will equitably manage the various demands on the state's water, taking into account and protecting proper existing uses of water.

Adequate flows and water levels for Neely Henry Lake and the other lakes in the upper Coosa River basin are critical to the health of our local economies as well as to the health of the greatly diverse aquatic life that exists in the river. I will identify some of the pertinent issues, principally in the context of the Neely Henry Lake area, and describe them at a high level, while other commenters address them in greater detail. Reduced water flows cause lower lake levels and significant degradation of water quality that will result in reduced property values, increased water treatment costs, increased navigation problems, increased lake access problems and negative consequences for fish and other aquatic life in the lake.

What is happening in Georgia must be considered in the development of Alabama's water management plan, as the impact of that state's actions have major consequences for the upper Coosa River. Georgia has plans to build multiple new reservoirs to the north of Atlanta. Several of these would impound waters that feed the Coosa River. Further, Georgia is also considering building a pipeline to transport up to 100 million gallons of water each day from the headwaters of the Coosa to metro Atlanta. Since very little or none of this water would be returned to the Coosa in the form of treated waste water, the pipeline would effectively constitute a 100 percent interbasin transfer of a significant amount of water from the Coosa River. The pipeline, coupled with the proposed new reservoirs, would significantly reduce flows in the Coosa River from what they are today.

Neely Henry Lake is arguably the single greatest asset our local communities have to attract new businesses and residents to the area and to retain existing businesses and residents. If sufficient

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water flows and levels are not maintained, the health of the lake will degrade, thus eliminating or at least diminishing, the lake as an asset. A significant portion of Neely Henry area residents and businesses get their drinking water from the Coosa River. As water flows decrease, the cost of treating drinking water and waste water increases, which results in an increase in water and sewer rates. Reduced water levels will turn many lakefront properties into mud-front properties, thus negatively impacting property values for lakefront residents. However, the negative effects of reduced water quality and water levels on our local economy expand the negative consequences on property values beyond lakefront property to all area property. Further, as property values decrease and the local economy suffers, area counties and cities will see a decrease in tax revenues needed to provide critical services to residents of the area.

Neely Henry Lake is the greatest tourist attraction in our area. It draws people to our area for fishing and other recreational activities. Degraded water quality has negative consequences for the health of the lake as a fishery. Without a healthy fishery, fishermen will not travel to the area to fish. And, lake access and navigation problems resultant from lower lake levels will negatively impact all area businesses that rely upon, or benefit from, lake-related tourism.

Finally, Neely Henry Lake and the upper Coosa River are blessed with greater diversity of aquatic life than many other areas in the country. Poor water quality would pose serious threats to much of that aquatic life, including any threatened or endangered species that reside in the Coosa.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my comments.