

**Georgia Environmental Finance Authority**

**WaterFirst Program Application**

The WaterFirst Program is a voluntary partnership between local governments, state agencies, and other organizations working together to increase the quality of life in communities through the wise management and protection of our valuable water resources. This proactive approach to water resources requires local governments to pursue environmental excellence beyond what is required by law. WaterFirst communities take a proactive approach to water resources planning by connecting land use, water quality, water quantity, and future needs. The nine main categories of WaterFirst include:

* Watershed assessment,
* Stormwater master planning,
* Wastewater treatment and management,
* Water supply planning,
* Water supply protection,
* Water conservation,
* Water reclamation and reuse,
* Educational outreach; and
* Regional water planning.

Communities meeting the WaterFirst goals are recognized statewide as a WaterFirst Community. Having demonstrated responsible stewardship of water resources for environmental and economic benefits today and in the future, WaterFirst Communities become eligible for financial and other benefits.

Technical assistance and workshops for WaterFirst participants are provided by the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) and recognized water experts around the state. Due to the hands-on nature of the program, only communities that go above and beyond are accepted into each WaterFirst class. However, communities that are not official program participants are encouraged to work independently towards their WaterFirst designation.

If you have questions about the WaterFirst Program, please contact waterresources@gefa.ga.gov and vthom@gefa.ga.gov.

**WaterFirst Program Process**

Becoming a WaterFirst community is a three-part process. The first step is to decide to pursue environmental excellence as a WaterFirst Community. Since environmental and economic conditions differ from one region to the next, the actions necessary to achieve WaterFirst designation will likewise differ.

The second step is to achieve and maintain environmental excellence beyond the minimum requirements of the law through the goals established in step one. Formal recognition as a WaterFirst Community will be made after the community's goals are reached. A presentation by the community seeking designation will be given to a committee of WaterFirst reviewers to determine if the community's goals have been met.

The third step is to move beyond environmental compliance and set additional goals to maintain environmental excellence with programs and program updates. WaterFirst staff will be available to work with the members of the WaterFirst class as needed. Site visits to participating communities will be scheduled periodically. Support can be requested at any time while the community works towards designation.

**Eligibility Requirements**

To participate in the WaterFirst Program, all communities are required to:

* Submit an application to GEFA;
* Be certified by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs as a Qualified Local Government;
* Have an active stormwater management program such as a MS4 phase I or II program or equivalent program based on community size, i.e., system mapping/inventory, educational materials, and storm drain stenciling; and
* Have an established inspection and maintenance ordinance for on-site disposal systems (septic systems).

Coastal communities in the 24-county coastal district must have management measures that are consistent with the 52 required management measures of the Coastal Nonpoint Source Management Program.

To receive the WaterFirst Community designation, a city or county must have achieved excellence as recommended by the WaterFirst Review Committee and approved by the GEFA executive director.

**Application Deadline**

Applications are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year.

Please submit a **digital copy** of the application to:

waterresources@gefa.ga.gov

vthom@gefa.ga.gov

**Selection Process for WaterFirst Designated**

A review committee of members from GEFA and the WaterFirst Steering Committee will forward recommendations to GEFA’s director of water resources with GEFA’s executive director providing final approval. A limited number of participants will be selected each year. Recognizing that water resources do not follow political boundaries, cities and counties are encouraged to submit joint applications and to work together to achieve the WaterFirst designation. Selection criteria will be based on numerous factors, including but not limited to, geographic diversity, city/county population range, and institutional capacity.

**Program Services**

*Initial visit for WaterFirst Designated*

Once selected to participate in the WaterFirst program, WaterFirst staff will arrange a time to meet with community officials to outline program goals and set a timeline by which achievements will be met. A review of needed financial resources, current water services provided, and proposals for community education and outreach initiatives will also be reviewed. Communities are expected to be proactive and to know what they would like to achieve through the WaterFirst Program. A date for a presentation to the community will also be set at this time to explain the WaterFirst Program and to build support for the community’s efforts.

*Technical assistance*

The WaterFirst Program brings with it the knowledge and assistance of leading water experts from across the state. Helping communities improve the management and protection of water resources is the program's highest priority. Innovative design assistance, water conservation workshops, and educational resources are a few examples of what the WaterFirst Program can provide.

*Peer-to-peer exchange*

GEFA will maintain a database of participants so communities addressing similar water challenges can learn from one another. WaterFirst does not intend to reinvent the wheel, but rather bring together available resources to ease the burden on individual communities. Exchanging ideas and information across the state to benefit our water resources and our communities is another top priority of the program.

*Case studies*

As communities achieve WaterFirst designation, their experiences, both successes and failures, will be part of a case study database maintained by GEFA to help inform future participants. The case studies will form an invaluable collection of “lessons learned” from across the state.

*WaterFirst benefits*

After achieving the WaterFirst Community designation, two road signs and a certificate recognizing the accomplishment will be presented to the designee. The community will also become eligible for other benefits, including reduced GEFA interest rates for water-related projects, priority status for the 319(h) grant, and annual eligibility for the CDBG program.

*Responsibilities of the participants*

The first and most important responsibility of communities participating in the WaterFirst Program is a solid commitment to improving the management and protection of our shared water resources. Communities will be expected to work towards their set goals in a timely manner and be proactive in solving problems and addressing the needs of the community. However, both the goals and the timeline for achievement should be realistic.

WaterFirst participants are expected to educate their constituents about the program and how it will benefit their community. Each program component provides for education and outreach initiatives, and communities are expected to share with residents the importance of sound water management and resource protection. In addition, citizen input should be encouraged as communities seek ways to address various water issues.

Once a community has been designated WaterFirst, it is expected that the high achievements will be maintained. If it is determined that the community no longer meets the requirements, then the WaterFirst designation and its benefits will be forfeited.

WaterFirst Communities are required to renew their designation every five years.

**To apply, please complete and return the application on the following pages and the checklist that has been included. Partial or incomplete applications will be rejected.**

**I. Applicant Information**

Please check one:  Individual City or County or  Multi-Jurisdictional Partnership

City/County of: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Email: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Person Completing Application:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**II. Community Profile**

(If applying as a partnership, please answer the following questions for each partner, separate pages may be added.)

Are you currently a Qualified Local Government?

What water services are provided by your local government? Does your service area extend beyond your jurisdiction?

How many residents does each service support?

What percent of residents currently use private wells? Septic systems?

Is surface or groundwater the primary water source for your community?

Please list your community's current water-related EPD permits.

Please list any EPD water permit violations that have occurred in the past 12 months.

Have you received any awards for outstanding water services?

Is your community on EPA's Significant Non-Compliance list?

**II. Community Profile (Continued)**

Is your community properly managing the finances of its water system by ensuring customers pay a fair amount for water usage (at least 1.25 percent of the median household income)?

Are all users of the system metered?

What Regional Water Council do you belong?

Are you involved in, or considering, any regional water projects?

Does the financial capacity analysis of the community indicate a coverage ratio of at least 125 percent?

Does the community's financial reporting meet the highest standards of the Government Finance Officers Association?

**III. Program Proposal**

Why does your community want to participate in the WaterFirst Program?

What major goals would you like to achieve regarding water resource stewardship?

Who will be designated within the local government(s) to oversee the WaterFirst Program? (Please include contact information.)

Which of the components of the WaterFirst Program do you feel your community has already addressed? **(Please use attached checklist and mark appropriately. Note that "Not Applicable" refers only to services not offered and determined not necessary in your community, not to issues that have not been addressed.)**

Please attach a map indicating the geographic area to be included in this WaterFirst application.

I understand that the WaterFirst Community Program is a voluntary effort to improve the management and protection of our water resources beyond the requirements of the law. I also understand that the WaterFirst designation can be lost if the community fails to maintain the achievements for which the award was given and that all benefits the designation brings with it will be forfeited.

I certify to the best of my knowledge that the information in this application is true and correct.

Print name of Chief Elected Official \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Chief Elected Official \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_\_\_