

WaterFirst

CARING FOR OUR WATER RESOURCES

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: Effingham County

Address: 804 South Laurel Street

City: Springfield

Zip Code: 31326

Phone: 912-754-8067

Fax: N/A

Email: twilkins@effinghamcounty.org

Name of Person Completing Application: Alex Perkins

Title: Engineering Project Coordinator

Address: 804 South Laurel Street

City: Springfield

Zip Code: 31329

Phone: 912-376-3712

Fax: N/A

Email: kperkins@effinghamcounty.org

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? Yes.

What water services are provided by your local government? Does your service area extend beyond your jurisdiction? Effingham County provides potable water distribution, wastewater collection and treatment, and reclaimed-water service. The County operates a non-discharging tertiary wastewater reclamation facility and distributes treated effluent for irrigation and industrial reuse. Potable water is supplied through treated surface water purchased from the City of Savannah and through County-operated groundwater wells. County water and sewer utility service is currently concentrated in portions of southern unincorporated Effingham County and several outlying developments. Water and sewer service is provided in certain areas of the unincorporated County.

How many residents does each service support? The total population of Effingham County is currently estimated to be ~75,443. Water is provided to 4,770 locations, and sewer is provided to 4,001 locations.

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

See Attachment, Household_Service_Calculations_2026.pdf. Figures shown reflect number of households and approximate population using each system in the unincorporated areas of Effingham County. Household numbers are also shown for the incorporated municipalities of Rincon, Springfield, or Guyton, although the county does not provide or monitor utilities for those areas.

Is surface or groundwater the primary water source for your community? Surface water is the primary water source for the majority of Effingham County's utility customers. The County purchases treated surface water from the City of Savannah Industrial and Domestic Water Treatment Plant. Several small outlying County systems are supplied by groundwater wells, which draw water from the Upper Floridian Aquifer.

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

Name/Location	Permit
Effingham GW Withdrawal Permit	051-0011
EC Surface Water	GA1030131

Please list any EPD water permit violations that have occurred in the past 12 months. None.

Have you received any awards for outstanding water services? No.

Is your community on EPA's Significant Non-Compliance list? No.

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)? Yes. Based on a typical residential household using 113 gallons per month, the annual water and sewer bill is approximately \$1,356, representing 2.022% of Effingham County's median household income of \$67,050.00.

Are all users of the system metered? Yes.

What Regional Water Council do you belong? The Coastal Georgia Water Planning Region

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

Does the financial capacity analysis of the community indicate a coverage ratio of at least 125 percent? At this time, no.

Does the community's financial reporting meet the highest standards of the Government Finance Officers Association? Effingham County prepares annual audited financial statements in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and Government Auditing Standards. The FY2025 audit received an unmodified opinion.

III. Program Proposal

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

Effingham County seeks to participate in the WaterFirst Program to strengthen its comprehensive approach to drinking water, wastewater, reclaimed water, stormwater, and watershed management. Rapid growth and continuing infrastructure needs require the County to plan proactively, protect its surface-water and groundwater sources, maintain regulatory compliance, and ensure that utility services remain reliable and financially sustainable. WaterFirst participation will provide an organized framework for evaluating existing programs, coordinating departments and regional partners, identifying opportunities for improvement, and demonstrating the County's commitment to

responsible water-resource stewardship. The designation would also support the County's strategic goals of balanced growth, infrastructure investment, accountable service delivery, and long-term community resilience. The practical benefits of grant eligibility and more favorable GEFA loan terms would be utilized to achieve these ends.

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

Effingham County's major goals are to protect the quality and long-term availability of surface water and groundwater; reduce water loss and promote conservation; expand and maintain reliable drinking-water and wastewater infrastructure; increase beneficial use of reclaimed water; strengthen watershed, stormwater, and source-water protection; incorporate green infrastructure and low-impact development practices; maintain regulatory compliance; improve public education and participation; coordinate water planning with municipalities and regional partners; and ensure that utility rates and capital planning support the long-term financial sustainability of the system.

Who will be designated within the local government(s) to oversee the WaterFirst Program? (Please include contact information.) **Tre Wilkins, Project Manager – 912-667-0621 – twilkins@effinghamcounty.org**

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.)**
See checklist (attached).

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

See map (attached). [Map-of-the-Effingham-County-Water-Sewer-and-Re-Use-System-PDF](#)

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 ____/____/____