

# Bill seeks to protect underground drinking water

[Mary Landers](#) | Savannah Morning News, Thursday, February 26, 2009 at 12:30 am

Coastal legislators want to continue to prevent treated wastewater or other surface water from being pumped into the Floridan aquifer, which supplies most of the water their residents drink.

The practice, called aquifer storage and recovery, has been outlawed in [Georgia](#) for about a decade after [Savannah](#)-based TSG Water Resources filed applications with the state to inject treated water from the Ogeechee River into the Floridan aquifer, where it would be stored for later withdrawal and sale to customers.

The moratorium is set to expire at the end of this year.

Rep. Terry Barnard, a Republican from [Glennville](#), authored HB 552, which was introduced Tuesday. The bill would prohibit indefinitely the drilling of any well created to inject surface water into the Floridan aquifer in coastal counties. It makes an exception for wells drilled to control or reduce saltwater intrusion.

"The argument today is: Where's the need in Georgia?" Barnard said. "There's no clear need to take surface water and store it in the aquifer."

Barnard said the bill likely would morph into an extended moratorium, rather than the permanent one he is proposing, as the measure makes its way through the House Natural Resources Committee. Some want to allow the newly formed regional water councils to weigh the value of aquifer storage and recovery, Barnard said.

That's what Rep. Buddy Carter wants. The [Pooler](#) Republican didn't sign onto Barnard's bill because he plans to introduce his own legislation as early as today that would extend the moratorium two years. Carter said he's "somewhat in favor of" aquifer storage and recovery, but he is troubled by the exclusion in Barnard's bill that allows the practice to prevent saltwater intrusion.

"If it's safe enough to be used to prevent saltwater intrusion, it ought to be safe enough to be used period," he said.

Some opposition

The Floridan aquifer is a 100,000-square-mile underground layer of soft rock that holds water and thus is tapped for drinking supplies in Florida, Coastal Georgia, South Carolina and Alabama.

Other states, including Florida, allow aquifer storage and recovery. But they've seen associated problems, including an increase in arsenic leaching into the pumped-in water in some areas.

The Chatham County Commission passed a resolution at its last meeting supporting a continued ban on aquifer storage and recovery.

Local environmental groups are opposed, too.

"It's just too much of a risk, and we don't need it," said Chandra Brown, the Ogeechee-Canoochee Riverkeeper and spokeswoman for the 174-member Georgia Water Coalition on this issue.

Aquifer storage and recovery, she said, "is one of those last resorts for aquifers, like those in Arizona that never recharge. It's not for a prolific aquifer where we haven't even thought about (water) reuse."

The coalition is pushing for a permanent ban on aquifer storage and recovery for all drinking water aquifers in the state.

Its concerns are more than theoretical, members say, and they point to a proposed wastewater treatment plant for the Tradeport East and Tradeport West industrial parks in Liberty County.

Some support

The consultant and contractor for the Liberty County Development Authority, a national firm called CH2M Hill, evaluated aquifer storage and recovery for disposal of the plant's treated wastewater.

In a letter to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the consultant cites only one reason the proposed practice was rejected: "Aquifer storage and recovery is not currently allowed in the State of Georgia but is being considered in the master plan as a long-term (five to 10 years) option."

Ben Brewton, who chairs the Coastal Environmental Organization and a former Bryan County official, said Floridan aquifer water in Coastal Georgia is high-quality.

"It's important to keep in mind that water is good enough, safe enough and pure enough for use without any treatment at all," he said. "Treatments like chlorine are used to protect the water against contamination in storage or transport."

That's another reason that pumping surface water into the aquifer sounds like bad stewardship of that resource to him.

"As far as Coastal Georgia is concerned, (aquifer storage and recovery) is a solution looking for a problem," he said.