
Water Resources

Position Statement. To ensure availability of safe and reliable fresh water resources, The Geological Society of America (GSA) encourages collaborative partnerships that enhance collection, management, and accessibility of water resource information; improve fundamental scientific understanding and analyses of water resources; increase stakeholder involvement in all aspects of water resource education, assessment, and decision making; and broaden education and outreach to foster collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, industrial and agricultural users, and the public.

Purpose. This position statement (1) summarizes the consensus views of GSA on water resource issues; (2) advocates improved adaptive management of water resources through collaboration of water professionals and concerned citizens with decision makers at all levels of government; and (3) provides a communications tool for geoscientists.

RATIONALE

Humans need water to sustain life; in the absence of sufficient water, civilizations, economies, and ecosystems collapse. Changing demographics, natural variability of the hydrologic cycle, and impacts of climate change all pose significant present-day challenges to ensuring that water of sufficient quantity and quality is available when and where it is needed. Energy production and agriculture are currently the world's largest users of fresh-water resources, and future needs will be greater. Increased production of biofuels and unconventional hydrocarbon resources boosts water demand and can significantly degrade water quality. Inadequate fresh water supply can lead to disease and death, drought, fire, ecosystem degradation, species loss, and severe socioeconomic disruption.

One example of increasing stresses on hydrologic systems – systems that may be unable to meet future demands – is drought. Drought is a common occurrence worldwide, varying only in intensity and locale, and more severe and prolonged droughts are forecast. For example, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates that by 2050 average moisture conditions in the southwestern United States will rival the worst conditions seen in major droughts of the twentieth century—even without considering effects of climate change. In Australia, the world's third leading exporter of grain, the harvest has fallen by 35% as a result of the worst drought in that nation's history, creating severe political and economic challenges. Drought in Somalia contributed to people being killed for their water wells. The world's third largest lake, Lake Tanganyika, dropped 1.5 meters in 5 years, severely impacting central Africa and affecting the Nile River, a lifeline for more than 100 million people. Lake Chad, once the world's sixth largest lake, is now less than one-twentieth of its extent in the 1960s.

Another example is water quality. Water quality is threatened by a growing list of pollutants, and water-related disease is a leading cause of death worldwide. Degraded water quality often results from reduced water quantity. Cost-effective and reliable hydrologic monitoring technologies are available, yet water-resource assessment and management is hampered by the lack of comprehensive and reliable data.

Mitigating present-day water shortages and managing future water resources requires broad, sustained efforts and active collaboration of scientists, engineers, managers, policy makers, and the public. Sometimes spanning geopolitical boundaries, geologically- and topographically defined hydrologic basins are a natural unit of water-resource assessment and management. Storage of surface water and groundwater in hydrologic basins helps mitigate the natural variability in supply resulting from both short-term changes in weather and long-term changes in climate. The interconnectedness of many surface-water and groundwater flow systems can also dampen the impacts of natural variability; a stream may lose water to an underlying aquifer in one area and gain water from an aquifer in another. Water flowing in many perennial streams and rivers is dominantly groundwater discharge for months at a time. Surface-water reservoirs constructed in an effort to increase stability of water supplies or to produce power can have adverse hydrologic and ecosystem impacts. In many regions, sufficient surface-water resources are absent, and populations and economies rely solely on groundwater. Whether relying on surface water, groundwater, or a combination, there are ongoing challenges on a worldwide basis in ensuring a safe and reliable supply of fresh water.

Climate change will continue to alter the availability of safe and reliable water supplies in both surface-water and groundwater systems to a varying degree around the world, and local and regional increases in drought and flooding are foreseeable hydrologic consequences. Prediction of the magnitude, timing, and location of the hydrologic impacts of climate change is hampered by an incomplete understanding of the complex interactions of the atmosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and land surface. Local-scale studies of small watersheds and related ecosystems can improve understanding of those interactions.

SCIENTIFIC AND PUBLIC POLICY ASPECTS OF WATER RESOURCES

Accommodating population growth and socioeconomic development and mitigating foreseeable adverse water-related impacts require development and implementation of broad, outcome-oriented water-resource science policies and initiatives. In turn, improved water-resource science and decision making requires better-quality and higher-resolution data, an increased fundamental understanding, more effective stakeholder interaction, and public education. Risk-based analyses can improve the technical basis for decision making and, as communication tools, can help stakeholders better understand the relative significance of important factors. In the absence of such analyses and the data to support them, many critical water-resource decisions will continue to be based on inadequate information and limited understanding.

Scientists, engineers, and managers seek better understanding, assessments, and management of water resources. They should also strive to share their knowledge with the public and to understand the public's information needs and concerns. Scientists should express clearly the confidence they have in knowledge used to support decision making. An additional burden on policy makers and the legal system is to be cognizant of the natural distribution and variability of water resources and to identify viable approaches when laws, compacts, or treaties are not consistent with the natural distribution or variability of water resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Increased public investment is needed to improve the scientific understanding of water resources.* Particularly, new hydrologic data are required to improve the reliability and reduce the uncertainty of scientific analyses supporting water resources management and policy decisions. Current hydrologic data and monitoring capabilities should be maintained, and new data sets and collection capabilities (e.g., using satellites) should be developed. Data should be collected at the frequency and scale needed

to support model analyses and decision making and be automated to the maximum practical extent. Data collection and management should be organized by surface-water and groundwater hydrologic basins and be readily accessible on the internet, consistent with the GSA Position Statement on Open Access to Data.

- *Improved fundamental understanding of the quantity, quality, distribution, and use of water resources is necessary to increase the reliability and utility of water-resource assessment and management tools.* Improved representation of geological, biological, and ecological systems—including underlying physical and chemical processes and their interactions—is needed. More complete understanding is required in the areas of climate change, the role of soil moisture in the hydrologic cycle, and surface water–groundwater interaction. Risk-based analyses yielding quantitative uncertainty estimates can be used to optimize data acquisition and enhance the scientific and socioeconomic basis of decision making for water resources management.

ABOUT THE GEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

The Geological Society of America, founded in 1888, is a scientific society with over 21,000 members from academia, government, and industry in more than 90 countries. Through its meetings, publications, and programs, GSA enhances the professional growth of its members and promotes the geosciences in the service of humankind. GSA encourages cooperative research among earth, life, planetary, and social scientists, fosters public dialogue on geoscience issues, and supports all levels of earth science education. Inquiries about the GSA or this position statement should be directed to GSA's Director for Geoscience Policy, Dr. Craig M. Schiffries, at +1-202-669-0466 or cschiffries@geosociety.org.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GSA AND ITS MEMBERS TO HELP IMPLEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

To facilitate implementation of the goals of this position statement, The Geological Society of America recommends the following actions:

- *We should seek opportunities to meet with stakeholders to identify information needs and to develop water-resource management goals and plans.* Water-resource professionals and other stakeholders should collaborate to identify information needs and to develop water-resource management goals and plans. Stakeholders include water managers, land managers, water users, policy makers, regulators, and the public. Place-based science with stakeholder involvement improves professional and stakeholder understanding and can reduce bias and increase effectiveness of adaptive decision making.
- *We should participate in public education activities at the local level.* Public education, a critical enabling element of effective water-resource management, is needed to foster partnership and collaboration among local, state, and federal governments; educational and research institutions; energy, industrial, and agricultural users; and the public.
- *We should participate in professional forums to help educate peers and the public about water resource issues.* In addition to quantity issues that affect growth and development and the basic sustaining of life, the quality of water resources is threatened by a growing list of pollutants. For example, water-related disease is a leading cause of death worldwide, and even trace amounts of some contaminants can significantly impair human and environmental health. Water quality is degraded by both contaminant discharges and reductions in water flow. Better data and analyses can help to prevent water pollution and improve water resource management.
- *We should provide examples of important water resources issues to improve effectiveness in communicating with decision makers and the lay public.* Decision makers and stakeholders in the lay public may see the world differently from scientists, and GSA members need to improve their ability to communicate with the public about geoscience issues. Examples of how water issues impact people can facilitate dialogue. For example, flooding along the Mississippi River in the United States regularly causes economic damage, and public expenditures support the development of property in flood prone areas along river basins and coasts. Whether resulting from industrial activity or inadequate sanitation, water contamination affects human and environmental health in both the developed and the developing world.