

STATUS REPORT ON THE FORMATION OF A DELTA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Chip Morgan
Delta Council
Stoneville, Miss.

In the latter part of the decade of the 1970's, Delta Council recognized that expanding acreages of irrigated rice and the potential growth of the farm-raised catfish industry in the Mississippi Delta would be contributing factors toward the need to carefully study the hydrology of the alluvial aquifer in the Mississippi Delta region. This region, an abundant source of quality water at very shallow depths, has become an essential part of the Delta's agricultural system in row crops, rice and catfish production. It is with this understanding of the importance of the alluvial aquifer to the economy of the Delta area that Delta Council passed a resolution in 1979 requesting that the U.S. Geological Survey and the Mississippi Department of Natural Resources initiate a groundwater study.

Following two years of inspections and surveys for more than 500 wells in the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, the U.S.G.S. and Mississippi Department of Natural Resources revealed the preliminary data compiled on two years of the groundwater study to the Water Resources Committee and Board of Directors of Delta Council. These studies indicated that the alluvial aquifer was not recharging at a rate consistent with the drawdown capacity being placed on the alluvial aquifer by industrial, agricultural, and municipal uses of the Delta's groundwater resources.

After careful consideration by agricultural and business leaders from the Delta area, the area-wide organization called a special meeting of specialists in agricultural economics from Mississippi State University, officials from the Soil Conservation Service, the Vicksburg District-Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Geological Survey and the Department of Natural Resources to study alternatives and methods of addressing this long-range project aimed at properly managing, utilizing and conserving this abundant natural resource so unique to the Mississippi Delta. It was the decision that special efforts would be made by the U.S.G.S. and the Department of Natural Resources to intensify their efforts in monitoring the status of the Mississippi alluvial aquifer through 1985, and that other agencies would offer special support and programmed initiatives to create an awareness among agriculture, business, municipal, and industrial interests throughout the area with regard to harnessing and better managing this natural resource. Of special significance, Delta Council asked the Vicksburg District-Corps of Engineers to implement a study on the economic feasibility of utilizing surface water on the interior streams and rivers of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta for irrigation and industrial purposes. The Corps of Engineers approved and funded such a study beginning in 1983, focusing on the stream flow capabilities of interior arteries as a means for identifying a practical approach toward surface water utilization as an alternate source to relieve the withdrawal rate from the alluvial aquifer in recent years. This study would be scheduled to be complete by 1987.

During 1982, Delta Council was requested to become a part of an effort initiated by Governor William Winter for the purpose of studying the water management policies, rules, and laws of the State

of Mississippi. The 32-member Mississippi Water Management Council worked together for one year to analyze the status of Mississippi's hydrology characteristics and came forth during the 1985 legislative session to propose major revisions in existing water laws and offered new legislation which would allow for multi-county areas to establish Water Management Districts in the interest of managing and conserving Mississippi's chief natural resource. This major legislative hurdle, once enacted, provided Delta Council with the opportunity to begin initiating steps to officially call attention to the opportunity for the Northwest Mississippi counties to join together in addressing water management in an orderly and well-coordinated manner.

Delta Council held five regional meetings in the 18-county area during the spring of 1985, where more than 600 interested leaders expressed their views on the need for such a Water Management District in the Delta and adopted a common resolution urging the Boards of Supervisors in the area to establish a single district for the entire area. Recognizing the homogeneous nature of the citizens of the 18-county area and their common interests in the rich alluvial aquifer that lies beneath the entire Delta area, participants in the regional meetings and news articles appearing in almost every major publication throughout the state called for action to be taken as soon as possible.

Currently, a common resolution is being drafted and carefully examined by leaders of Delta Council and members of the technical staff of the Law Institute at the University of Mississippi and the Governor's Office. The resolution will advance to Boards of Supervisors during the spring of 1986 for their careful study and consideration. Local leaders of Delta Council will meet with Boards of Supervisors to offer an explanation and rationale for support of the resolution which must be approved by the Boards of Supervisors of each participating county. Major points included in the resolution are:

1. Establishment of an 18-member Commission consisting of one elected representative from each participating county;
2. Enabling authority for the Commission to levy up to 2 mills in county ad valorem taxes in order to support operations of the Water Management District;
3. Responsibilities outlined directing the Commission to supervise, manage, and implement those actions pertaining to the water resources of the area which are in the best interest of the economic welfare of the area.

In assuming that Boards of Supervisors acknowledge the importance of a Water Management District to the future of the area, Delta Council is pledged to cooperate and support its commission in the management and conservation of the water resources of the Yazoo-Mississippi Valley for the future of agriculture and business.