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Senate passes resolution for water policy committee

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MONTGOMERY - A new water policy committee of 14 lawmakers would be empowered to draft a state water management plan that the entire Legislature could adopt next year, under a joint resolution the state Senate passed Tuesday.

Among other things, the management plan might give the governor power to order statewide water-use reductions during droughts, said Sen. Kim Benefield, D-Woodland.

"A statewide water management plan will help us mitigate the effects of drought on our state," she said.

Last year, the Birmingham Water Works and many other water utilities statewide imposed mandatory or voluntary water restrictions for their service areas. But Benefield said no one person or group has the power to order water restrictions statewide or decide what water uses are most important.

"We need something in place on how we're going to deal with a shortage," Benefield said. "We need to look at what our priorities are."

The joint resolution must pass both the Senate and House of Representatives to take effect.

If it does, the resolution says, the Permanent Joint Legislative Committee on Water Policy and Management would suggest new laws and administrative actions that would:

- Expand water availability to meet current and future demands.

- Develop conservation programs.

- Encourage producers of water-efficient products to locate their operations in Alabama.

- Create incentives for water conservation and the prudent use of water.

The committee would make its first recommendations to the full Legislature by about March 2009, the middle of next year's regular legislative session. It also would make recommendations in following years. It could not spend more than \$10,000 a year.

Rep. Greg Canfield, R-Vestavia Hills, who plans to shepherd the resolution through the House, said the drought last

year made it clear that water is "becoming a scarce resource that must be properly conserved and managed."

"Alabama's water is not a partisan resource," he said.

Sen. Harri Anne Smith, R-Slocomb, Sen. Parker Griffith, D-Huntsville and Rep. Mac Gipson, R-Prattville, also voiced support for the resolution at a State House press conference.

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