

2011's worst offenses against Georgia's Water



#8 Georgia's Coastal Wetlands: Docks in Georgia's Coastal Wetlands Spoil the "Marshes of Glynn"

Our coastal marshes that Sidney Lanier celebrated in one of Georgia's best known poems are now under attack by development that has been allowed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Georgia's Coastal Resources Division (CRD) and the Governor-appointed Coastal Marshlands Protection Committee. These federal and state entities have permitted the construction of thousands of docks in Georgia's 450,000 acres of tidal marshes. These docks can stretch for hundreds of yards into the marshes and often alter and kill marsh vegetation, turning these productive wetlands into barren mud flats. At stake is critical habitat for nearly 70 percent of marine species. Based on past studies, the value of Georgia's marshes is well over \$5 billion annually in ecosystem services.

The Waterbody:

Stretching the length of the Georgia coast, the state's tidal marshes are among the most productive ecosystems in the world, generating almost 20 tons of biomass per acre annually. In addition to serving as essential habitat for a host of marine and intertidal species, marshes protect developed areas of the mainland from storm surge damage by dissipating wave energy. As the value of coastal development increases, the benefit of surge protection rises proportionally. Moreover, marsh vistas add greatly to property value and quality of life for the coast's three-quarter million residents. Millions of tourists visit coastal Georgia annually, attracted by natural features that are dominated by tidal marsh vistas. It is estimated that about \$1.8 billion is spent annually in the region on eco-tourism activities, including nature study, fishing, and birding. Five major Georgia river systems drain interior areas of the state into Georgia's tidal marshes (the Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha, Satilla, and St. Marys).

The Dirt:

The area of tidal marsh destroyed or degraded by docks and marinas has never been estimated, but the threat appears to be growing, as well as accumulating, over the long term. During periods of rampant development and land speculation, more than 200 docks a year have been approved by CRD.





In 2009, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources adopted new rules to protect the marshes, including restrictions on long docks, but the rules also cut the review period for shorter docks in half, ignoring the fact that multiple short docks clustered together can cause marsh destruction similar to a single long dock.

Because of the highly variable tidal-flow conditions among hundreds of coastal estuaries, problems caused by dock permitting are not uniform, thus uniform rules don't always adequately protect the marsh. At the same time, adequate scientific expertise is not available to CRD staff that are obligated to review permit applications.

Furthermore, developers commonly request dock permits for projects prior to their occupancy by residents because securing dock permits in advance greatly increases the value of adjacent lots. Thus, dock permitting has become a critical factor in rampant speculation that has occurred along the coast in several real-estate bubbles over the past

thirty years. It is estimated that speculation has nearly doubled the amount of habitat disruption and degradation above the level associated with actual demand. This significantly magnified harm is caused by excessive land clearing and premature site preparation, done in attempts to create profits from "flipping" property.

What Must Be Done:

Because of the variable conditions along the Georgia coast, there is still much that is not known about how docks impact our marshes. To properly protect this valuable resource, additional studies are needed to evaluate how flow conditions, prevailing winds and currents, proximity to other docks and flow restrictions, as well as the size and design of structures, effect marsh destruction. Based on this research, new criteria for dock permitting should be adopted. Until then, dock permitting should be suspended.

Furthermore, the Corps permitting process should be reformed to ensure that harmful cumulative impacts are more accurately evaluated so they can be avoided by better regulation.

There must be a comprehensive and consistent program for monitoring impacts after permits are issued, so that such impacts can be controlled and conditions imposed on future permitting decisions.

Finally, CRD must administer the Georgia Coastal Management Program more responsibly to ensure better enforcement of existing environmental laws.



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