

2011's worst offenses against Georgia's Water



#9 South Georgia Wetlands: Four Decades of Ditches Dry Out South Georgia Wetlands

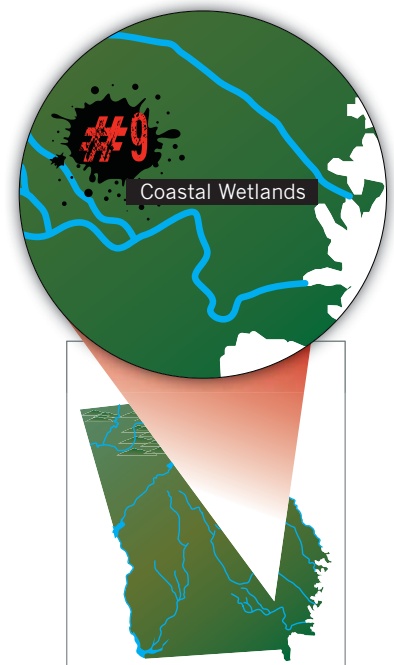
Since the 1970s, state and federal regulatory agencies have allowed the destruction of more than 200,000 acres of highly critical wetlands throughout South Georgia to increase timber production and agricultural yields and usher in residential and commercial development. These wetlands that captured water and slowly released it to streams no longer perform that important function. The result has been increased floods when it rains and record low flows when it doesn't—and ultimately a sharp reduction in the harvest of crabs and brown shrimp in Georgia's coastal waters.

The Waterbody:

Of Georgia's 38 million acres of land, some 7.7 million are classified as wetlands by the U.S. Geological Survey. While most Georgians think Okefenokee Swamp when they think "wetlands," Georgia's wetlands are tremendously diverse, ranging from seepage areas in the mountains to tidal flats on the coast. However, the greatest concentration of wetlands is in the Coastal Plain of South Georgia. Though these forested foodplains and wetlands may not seem directly linked to our rivers and streams, they play an important role in holding water during rain events and dispensing it during dry periods. The sponges and kidneys of our state, they mitigate major floods, lessen the impacts of drought, and clean the water that passes through them, while regulating the amount of freshwater entering Georgia's coastal estuaries where commercially important seafood find critical habitat. Additionally, these wetlands provide important habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife

The Dirt:

Since the mid-1970s, the state and federal government has allowed the destruction of well over 200,000 acres of wetlands throughout South Georgia. In an effort to convert these wild lands into "useful" acreage, property owners have "ditched" their land to carry water to nearby streams rapidly and keep the land dry. Many of the major wetland systems and streams have themselves been channelized using vast federal and state tax resources. Once converted the





property has been employed in agriculture, silviculture and commercial and residential development. The cumulative impacts have been catastrophic.

High flows on many South Georgia streams have increased by 25 to 35%, generating record and near-record flooding during rain events that would previously produce only minor flooding. Meanwhile, low-flows periods have been worsened by as much as 90%. Small streams dry up during the dry periods of even the wettest years and main river channels have become creek-like.

A recent permit, for example, in the headwaters of Penholloway Creek, a tributary of the lower Altamaha, granted a regional landfill the right to fill over 100 acres of wetlands--this in the headwaters of a creek that the state has already identified as "polluted" due to low oxygen levels as a result of chronic low-flow conditions.

The impacts of the destruction of inland wetlands trickles down to the coast and Georgia's estuaries where the right mix of salt water and freshwater plays a critical role in the productivity of valuable marine species. Georgia's harvest of blue crab and brown shrimp has declined sharply with the loss of these wetlands. Blue crab harvests have declined at least 60 percent since 1970 while brown shrimp harvests have dropped by more than 50 percent over the same period. Likewise, sport fishing and tourism have been negatively impacted by these losses.

Permits issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) are required before wetlands can be altered, but too often the Corps fails in administering the process and enforcing the laws. Meanwhile the State of Georgia provides little oversight.

What Must Be Done:

To prevent the continued destruction of Georgia's remaining wetlands, the Corps must administer its permitting program properly and enforce the laws protecting these wetlands. Furthermore, federal investments in wetlands restoration must continue and Georgia must find ways for property owners to preserve and restore wetlands.

The Corps must improve evaluation of permit applications to ensure that wetlands have been identified properly. Additionally, the Corps must ensure that when wetlands are altered and destroyed, the permit applicant must provide adequate compensation by improving or creating wetlands nearby.

Further investments in U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wetlands Reserve Program should be made to allow property owners to voluntarily restore wetlands.

At the state level, Georgia should investigate programs that help property owners preserve and restore wetlands as recommended in several regional water plans.



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