

# **REPORT ON THE GEORGIA WATER COALITION: A POWERHOUSE FORCE FOR GEORGIA'S WATERS**

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A long-time funder of The Georgia Water Coalition (GWC) recently assessed the efficacy of its environmental program funding. The assessment revealed that the resources invested in the GWC over the last twelve years have created a powerful statewide force for Georgia's waters. The GWC is an exceptional leader on critically important water issues within the state of Georgia and the southeastern region. Since its formation in 2002, the Coalition has accrued a track record of successes that establish it as a state powerhouse, and a highly effective voice on water management and conservation issues.

The Coalition addresses what the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has called "one of the most critical natural resource issues facing the United States and the world: managing the supply and availability of water." Georgia is blessed with more than 70,000 miles of streams and rivers, nearly a half-million acres of lakes, and 4.5 million acres of freshwater wetlands. However, this abundance is threatened by poor management that places Georgia's water resources, and the many human uses of them, at risk.

By combining astute political savvy with scientific and legal expertise, the GWC has become an effective and respected voice on Georgia's complex water issues. Its extensive membership and supporters bring considerable clout to disputes over water management. The breadth of interests reflected in the Coalition enables it to engage on a variety of water topics. From its beginnings as a coalition of four organizations, the GWC now includes more than 200 groups whose members hail from many walks of life: sportsmen, conservationists, business owners, civic groups, religious organizations, farmers, homeowner and lake associations, and others. The groups are active throughout the state, bringing geographic diversity to the Coalition as well as multiple interests.

Through the GWC, many interests work together to tackle critically important water issues in the state legislature, within state agencies, and in communities around Georgia. Over the past dozen years, the GWC has been a leader in important efforts to better manage, conserve and protect Georgia's waters. The following is a sample of the GWC's significant accomplishments:

- **Keeping Georgia's waters a public resource.** The Coalition led efforts to defeat legislation in 2003 that would have privatized Georgia's water resources and led to the marketing and sale of water to the highest bidder. The GWC has worked hard to repel subsequent attempts. In 2014, the GWC helped block a version of the "Flint River Drought Protection Act" that would have allowed the state to assert title to a significant amount of Georgia's waters, infringing on property rights and affecting the availability of water for multiple uses.
- **Responding to emergencies that threaten public health and Georgia's waters.** For years, the GWC has highlighted the need to improve the state's emergency response capability when rivers, streams or lakes are threatened by pollution. The massive pollutant spill and fish kill on the Ogeechee River in 2011 catapulted the need for better emergency response into the public limelight.

The GWC worked hard to inform the media and citizens about threats to public health and the environment from polluting spills and other emergencies, and it authored and promoted a bill to improve the Environmental Protection Division's emergency response program. This important bill passed the state legislature and became law in 2014.

- **Promoting wise management of the state's waters.** The ways in which water is used, managed and conserved in Georgia directly affect the state's population, natural environment, tourism and outdoor recreation industries, and agriculture, to name just a few of the interests affected by water use. For a decade, the GWC has promoted comprehensive and enforceable state-wide water planning as a prudent, economically important and environmentally vital action. The Coalition was a leader in securing legislation mandating creation of the "Georgia Statewide Water Management Plan" in 2004, and continues to work hard on the law's implementation. The GWC is an important voice in calling for improved environmental protection provisions and conservation requirements within the state plan. Without forward-looking planning, Georgia's waters are at direct risk from over-use and mismanagement that could result in dire impacts.
- **Protecting Georgia's waters from massive hog farm operations.** In 2013, the state proposed to exempt major hog operations from basic pollution reduction requirements. These massive industrial hog operations generate huge amounts of waste: an industrial hog farm with 12,500 hogs can generate as much waste as a city of 50,000 people. The GWC successfully repelled efforts by the state to allow industrial hog operations to avoid basic pollution restrictions, thereby helping to better protect human health and the environment.
- **Educating the press and public about pivotal water issues.** Every year, the GWC releases its acclaimed "Dirty Dozen" report that highlights water pollution and management issues at a dozen sites around Georgia. The report generates significant press coverage and public interest in the health of waterways across the state. In addition to the "Dirty Dozen" report, the GWC also conducts media and citizen outreach around important water issues as they arise throughout the year.
- **Bringing together many interests in common cause.** The GWC is a forum in which people from all walks of life gather. Sportsmen and business leaders, civic groups and faith-based organizations, conservationists and town associations, all join together to promote wise management of Georgia's waters. In a time of divisiveness and political polarization, the GWC stands as an example of how people with different backgrounds and viewpoints can agree and work together on shared concerns.

Water issues will continue to be critically important in Georgia in the coming years. Water use intersects with other human activities such as energy production, agriculture, forest management, and urban and suburban growth, while water availability is critical to healthy and productive ecosystems. How the state manages its waters is important locally and regionally, and sends a powerful message nationally.

The GWC provides a unified, informed and effective voice on water issues within Georgia. It has become a model for educated citizen engagement. It has an impressive track record of accomplishments, and it continues to identify and work on water issues of utmost importance to Georgia's human and natural worlds.