



Georgia's 2017

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Rep. John Meadows

CONASAUGA AND OOSTANAULA RIVERS

House Rules Chairman John Meadows Fights to Prevent Pollution from Fracking

INTRODUCTION:

In late 2015, when wildcatters began calling property owners around Calhoun and Rome seeking to purchase their mineral rights to drill for natural gas, a community stood on high alert. Concerned residents poured into a public meeting that winter about natural gas and fracking sponsored by the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) and the Coosa River Basin Initiative (CRBI), making it a standing-room only affair. There, they learned that beneath a large swath of northwest Georgia was the Conasauga Shale formation, a geologic feature said to hold as much as 625 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. They also learned that the controversial practice of hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” might be used to extract this gas, and that Georgia’s existing laws offered no protections against the risks associated with fracking—risks that have resulted in the contamination of groundwater and surface water in other areas. That’s when local residents turned to Rep. John Meadows (R-Calhoun) for help. The powerful chairman of the House Rules Committee did not disappoint his constituents.

THE WATER BODY:

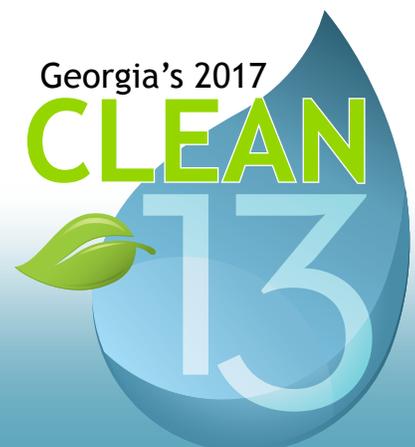
About a half million people in an eight county area in northwest Georgia that sits atop the Conasauga shale formation depend upon the rivers and streams and underground aquifers of Northwest Georgia for their drinking water. The streams that drain the 5,000 square-mile upper Coosa River basin are home to 30 species of fish, mussels, snails and crayfish that are found no where else in the world, making this river system the most biologically unique in North America. The basin is home to 114 species of fish, 27 species of mussels, 24 species of snails and 18 species of crayfish, including 14 federally protected aquatic species. A treasure trove of biodiversity, it is also home to a thriving outdoor recreation economy, catering to boaters and anglers.

THE CLEAN:

Upon hearing concerns of local residents, Chairman Meadows took action. He consulted the governor’s office, identified gaps in existing laws and by the opening weeks of the 2017 legislative session introduced HB 205, a measure to update the state’s 1975 Oil and Gas and Deep Well Drilling Act, a law adopted long before the widespread use of fracking techniques to extract natural gas.



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“I’m a fan of fracking,” Meadows said, citing the need for U.S. energy independence. “But, I’m not a fan of fracking at the expense of our drinking water. I read some of the articles about things that had happened, particularly up in Pennsylvania, where whole cities and counties have had their water sources invaded. I don’t want us to have to go through that.”

HB 205 improves the state’s 40-year-old drilling laws that forced EPD to review and issue complex drilling permits in just 15 days and permitted gas companies to drill without notification of local governments or adjacent property owners. It sets in place regulations that provide for public involvement in the permitting process and require drillers to identify and monitor drinking water sources near their wells.

In introducing his legislation from the House well in February, he first made sure that each of his colleagues had a bottle of Calhoun’s Big Springs water on their desks. “The bill is not about ‘I’m for fracking or against fracking,’” he said. “It’s about I’m for water.”

That Chairman Meadows took the lead on new drilling regulations in a conservative political climate in which “regulation” is often viewed as a four-letter word came as no surprise to those that have followed him since he served as mayor of Calhoun from 1985 to 1998. He was known to take elementary school children on tours of the city’s water and wastewater treatment plants during that era, and he often says that the region’s two most important resources are children and water.

That’s because he knows something about the impacts of water pollution. A native of Calhoun, he grew up eating fried catfish pulled from the Oostanaula River. “The Oostanaula River used to be one fine place to go,” he said, but by the time he began serving on Calhoun’s city council that once fine place had become so polluted by upstream industries that the city was forced to abandon its drinking water intake on the Oostanaula and spend \$8 million to build a new raw water intake on the nearby and unpolluted Coosawattee River.

Since entering the legislature in 2004, he has been a steadfast defender of clean water. He cut his teeth (and got put in leadership’s doghouse) fighting a massive resort development on state-owned Jekyll Island—a place whose golf courses and nesting turtles are near and dear to the long-time island visitor.

Since ascending to the chairmanship of the Rules Committee, he has repeatedly stepped in to halt and/or amend legislation. His efforts led to improving the Flint River Drought Protection Act in 2014 and strengthening the marshland protection act in 2015.

Though HB 205 did not pass during the 2017 session due to an unfriendly and unrelated amendment added in the Senate, Chairman Meadows expects full passage early in the 2018 session. If adopted, it will bring Georgia’s outdated oil and gas drilling laws into the 21st century.

*Top: Legislation introduced by Rep. John Meadows to regulate fracking will help keep Georgia rivers like the Oostanaula clean for all their many uses.
Left: Chairman John Meadows and wife, Marie.*



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