

Georgia's 2017

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Mark Masters

APALACHICOLA, CHATTAHOOCHEE & FLINT RIVERS

Albany State University Scientist Plays Critical Role In Water Planning

INTRODUCTION:

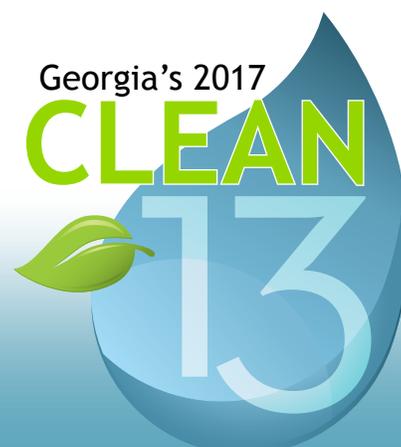
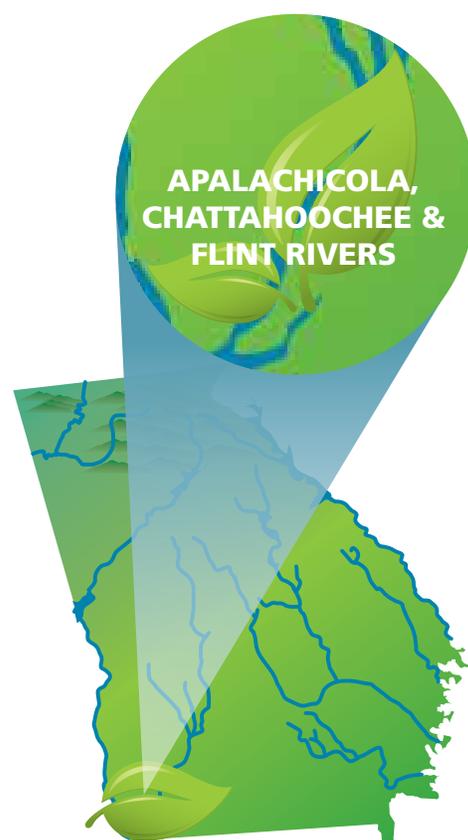
When the first shots were fired in the water dispute between Georgia, Florida and Alabama over the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint (ACF) Rivers, Mark Masters was still in middle school. At the time, his knowledge about the ACF was mostly limited to how much water was in Kiokee Creek, a tiny tributary of the Flint just a "stone's throw" from his house. These days, Mark's understanding of the ACF system is considerably more comprehensive and he can tell you all about flow levels, and why they matter, at places like Peachtree Creek, Milford and Sumatra. Since his time as a research assistant at the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Peanut Research Laboratory where he helped develop irrigation methods and strategies designed to conserve water, Masters has been knee-deep in solving Georgia's water challenges. As Director of the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center at Albany State University, he works to provide the most objective data possible to inform statewide water planning and management. He also played a key role in the development of the ACF Stakeholders' Sustainable Water Management Plan (SWMP), a plan that provides a template for the three states and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to improve management of the river system to meet the needs of all water users from the mountains of Georgia to Apalachicola Bay.

THE WATER BODY:

Embroided in controversy since 1990, the waters of the ACF Basin both unite, and divide, the states of Alabama, Florida and Georgia. The Chattahoochee supplies drinking water for some 4 million Georgians, the Flint and underlying aquifers in southwest Georgia provide water for another million Georgians, plus supplemental irrigation water to hundreds of thousands of acres of cropland that serve as the economic foundation for the region; and in Florida, the Apalachicola River feeds Apalachicola Bay, which is considered one of the most productive estuaries in the northern hemisphere. The ACF is a basin defined by an arguably unmatched diversity of water use and stakeholder interests.

THE CLEAN:

On May 13, 2015, members of ACF Stakeholders accomplished what 25 years of history suggested was impossible: they reached consensus on a plan to equitably share and manage the water in the ACF Basin. The seven years leading up to the eventual adoption of the SWMP Masters called "frustratingly powerful."





The consensus decision-making process adopted by the Stakeholders was anything but efficient. At times, it was tedious and contentious as the 56-member panel worked to reach agreement, but Masters credited that process with the Stakeholder's ultimate success.

“Without all those early meetings on what, at the time, seemed insignificant issues, I don't think the members would have developed the trust in each other needed to get over the finish line. It was the very definition of team accomplishment,” he said.

Some Stakeholders point to Mark's support behind the scenes as key. “If it hadn't been for his calm hand and sage advice, it would have all fallen apart. He was the glue,” said Gordon Rogers, Flint Riverkeeper and ACF Stakeholders Board member.

While the SWMP never received an endorsement by the states, the recommendations included in the plan received a formal review by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and it was referenced a number of times by Special Master Ralph Lancaster in last year's hearing in the Florida v. Georgia equitable apportionment case.

For Masters, a scientist by training, developing a plan to manage the river system for the benefit of all three states is about knowing facts and working cooperatively with all the people that depend on the rivers.

“It's all about the people,” he said. “The lasting relationships built across political, geographic, economic, social and institutional boundaries are the true value of ACF Stakeholder process. The Basin is truly better off because of this work.”

While the “water war” remains unresolved, Masters continues to provide critical data to help state and regional water planners make informed decisions, particularly regarding agricultural water use. Recently, he led a team that produced estimates of current and future agricultural water demand to inform Georgia's Regional Water Planning process.

“The fact remains that you can't manage what you can't measure,” notes Donald Chase, farmer and Chair of the Upper Flint Regional Water Council. “Mark and the team from the Water Policy Center are a trusted resource for those of us in agriculture and their support was critical in completing our first two water management plans.”

This planning and the continued collection of data about the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint leaves Masters optimistic about the future: “The truth is, we are blessed with a relative abundance of water in our part of the world, irrigators are remarkably efficient with their on-farm water use, the foundation for on-going planning work is as strong as ever and, importantly, the universe of stakeholders willing to sit down and cooperatively seek solutions is growing. That's all good news.”

Top: As director of the Georgia Water Planning and Policy Center at Albany State University, Mark Masters provides critical data on agricultural water use for state and regional water planners. Left: A native of southwest Georgia and an agricultural producer himself, Masters has worked for years to find ways to cooperatively share the water of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint river system among its many users.



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