

Georgia's 2018

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Rep. Jon Burns

GEORGIA'S WATER

House Majority Leader from Effingham County Champions Conservation Funding

INTRODUCTION:

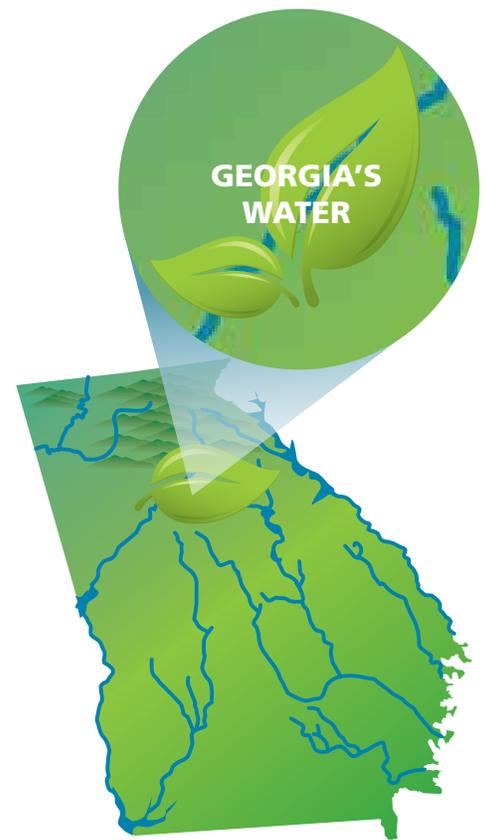
In November, Georgians will have the opportunity to pass an historic constitutional amendment. If approved by voters, the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act (GOSA) amendment will set aside up to \$20 million a year in sales taxes already collected on purchases of outdoor sporting goods equipment to protect the state's water and land. And, unlike many other state collections, these funds will be "dedicated," meaning they can't be redirected by budget writers to fund other state operations. Its passage would establish Georgia's first-ever dedicated source of conservation funding. Among the legislators sponsoring GOSA was Effingham County Republican Rep. Jon Burns. House Majority Leader since 2015, Rep. Burns wields considerable influence, and during his 14 years in office, he's used that influence and his legislative acumen to not only usher through this year's landmark GOSA legislation, but a host of other measures protecting Georgia's water resources.

THE WATER BODY:

Georgia is blessed with abundant water resources. A network of some 70,000 miles of rivers and streams courses through the state. These waterways are connected to nearly 5 million acres of wetlands and together they feed and fill more than 425,000 acres of public lakes and reservoirs. Along with the state's underground aquifers, these water bodies supply Georgia's 10 million residents with some 3 billion gallons of water daily that is used for everything from drinking water to cooling nuclear reactors. In addition to these services, Georgia's waterways are home to more than 325 species of fish, including eight federally protected species, and the rivers also harbor 165 species of mussels and snails, more than all but three other states in the country. The state's bountiful outdoor recreation opportunities fuel large portions of the state's economy. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that consumer spending on outdoor recreation activities in Georgia annually tops \$27 billion and generates \$1.8 billion in state and local tax revenue.

THE CLEAN:

For years, Georgia has lagged behind neighboring states in terms of the amount of money dedicated to land conservation. Between 1998 and 2008, North Carolina and Florida dedicated \$1.4 billion and \$2.7 billion respectively to those purposes while Georgia, with no dedicated funding sources, spent just \$303 million during a similar time period, according to statistics compiled by The Trust for Public Land.





But, if the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act (GOSA) amendment championed by Rep. Burns and his colleagues passes muster with voters in November that will change. Polling shows the amendment has strong bi-partisan support.

“We’ve heard time and time again that Georgia is one of the few states that lacks dedicated funding for environmental conservation,” said Rep. Burns. “That statistic is history now. GOSA is going to help us balance the concrete and asphalt that accompany growth with trees, parks, and trails.”

Indeed, funds collected through GOSA will not only preserve land, they’ll also be used to support local parks and trails and expand opportunities for nature-based recreation.

But GOSA is not Rep. Burns’ only legislative achievement for Georgia’s water.

In earlier sessions, he was instrumental in defeating a proposal that would have exempted the Georgia Department of Transportation from many of the state’s erosion and sedimentation laws, despite the fact that DOT is among the largest movers of dirt in the state. Said the former DOT board member turned state representative: “Government agencies should be held to the same standard of compliance as the private sector.”

In 2011, after discharges from a Screven County textile plant into the Ogeechee River caused a massive fish kill in his district, Rep. Burns took action. Noting that the state’s response to the emergency was poorly coordinated, in 2014 he sponsored legislation (HB 549) restoring an emergency response team at the state’s Environmental Protection Division, a safety net that budget cuts had previously eliminated.

And, in 2017 in the midst of a pitched battle over a petroleum pipeline to be built through coastal Georgia, Rep. Burns sponsored legislation (HB 413) that protected landowners by limiting petroleum pipeline companies’ ability to use eminent domain. That pipeline proposal was ultimately derailed in part because of the legislation.

As a Republican lawmaker, Rep. Burns is not alone in dispelling the stereotype that his party is weak on the environment. “I do not believe that any American, Republican or Democrat, is anti-environment,” he said. “No matter your politics, we can all agree that clean water, clean air and clean wildlife habitats are all good things which we should strive for. Ultimately, we just have to craft balanced policies that respect businesses and the environment.”



Top: Rep. Jon Burns championed this year’s Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act. If approved by voters in November, the constitutional amendment will create a dedicated funding source for protecting land and water. Above: As House Majority Leader, Rep. Jon Burns works with his colleagues to craft legislation and usher bills through the legislative process.



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