

Georgia's 2018

# CLEAN WATER HEROES

City of Augusta Utilities, Columbia County  
Water Utility, Savannah Utility Services

## SAVANNAH RIVER

Water Utilities Invest in Study to Restore Savannah River

### INTRODUCTION:

For more than a century, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has dredged and re-engineered the Savannah River along the Georgia-South Carolina border. First, in the 1930s by straightening dozens of the river's natural bends or "oxbows," and more recently, by dredging the Savannah Harbor. The result of these projects is a river that no longer can function as nature intended. The Savannah's diminished ability to filter and dilute pollutants threatens aquatic wildlife and creates challenges for communities and businesses that discharge treated sewage or industrial waste into the river. Now, thanks to the support of water utilities along the river and Savannah Riverkeeper, the Savannah is on the brink of a multi-million dollar project that could restore the river's natural flows and functions and improve its health from Augusta to Savannah.

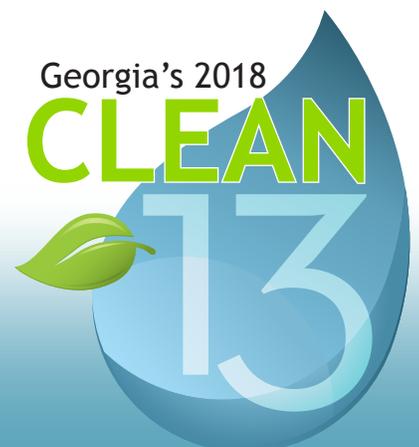
### THE WATER BODY:

Flowing more than 300 miles and forming the border between Georgia and South Carolina, the Savannah River is Georgia's second largest river basin. On the Georgia coast, it supports the fourth-largest port in the United States. Upriver, it is no less important, supplying drinking water for 1.4 million people, including residents in its namesake city as well as Augusta. Beneath the river's surface is a treasure trove of biological diversity. More than 100 fish species call the Savannah home, including the federally protected Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons that spawn there. The first river to be explored by Georgia's founders in 1733, 280 years later it remains a vital part of the state's economy and cultural and natural heritage.

### THE CLEAN:

Industries and water utilities that discharge treated wastewater to the Savannah River are in a bind, in large part due to nearly a century of "river improvements" meant to improve navigation and increase commerce from the coast to Augusta.

During the middle part of the 20th century, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cut through thirty-two bends in the river to shorten the distance from Augusta to Savannah by 26 miles. The extensive effort never generated the expected barge traffic to Augusta, but it did leave





a legacy of environmental damage. Without the bends and oxbows and connected wetlands, the river is less able to naturally treat pollutants and nutrients, causing oxygen levels to decrease and greatly reducing habitat for the river's fish and mussels.

This means that to keep the Savannah healthy, nearly 50 municipalities and industries along the river spend millions of dollars removing pollutants from their wastewater before discharging it into the river.

But in 2013, a settlement in a lawsuit brought against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by Savannah Riverkeeper and others over the deepening of the Savannah Harbor provided hope for the beleaguered river and those that discharge waste to it.

The settlement provided some \$13 million to restore the river's meanders, oxbows and wetlands. The project would lengthen the river and improve its ability to naturally cleanse itself...but only if local funding could be secured to start the project.

That's when the cities of Augusta and Savannah and Columbia County stepped to the plate. Together, water utilities in these communities pledged nearly \$1 million for a study to determine which parts of the river are the best suited for restoration. The Corps is now undertaking the study and restoration activity is expected to follow.

"It's huge," said Savannah Riverkeeper Tonya Bonitatibus of the buy in from local water utilities. "This project positions dischargers to restore the river they rely on, while giving the river its kidney system back."

If the restoration projects prove effective, the effort could set the stage for water utilities to fund additional projects to return the Savannah to its historic meandering route. If all the oxbows are returned, Savannah Riverkeeper estimates that 40 river miles and some 70,000 acres of wetlands can be created.

For Tom Wiedmeier, director of Augusta Utilities, the plan is especially positive because it has required cooperation from river users from Augusta to the coast.

"You have to look at this holistically—not just what's happening at the end of your pipe," he said. "A lot of times there's a lot of friction between upstream and downstream communities, but we're all on the same page with this one."



*Top: Savannah River anglers may be among the beneficiaries of the oxbow restoration project. Restoration efforts are expected to improve habitat for fish and other aquatic wildlife. Above: The Savannah River oxbow restoration project will reconnect the main channel of the river with some of its historic bends or oxbows that were cut off by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' projects in the 20th century designed to make the river more navigable for commercial barge traffic.*



#### For More Information Contact:

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