

Georgia's 2019

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Rep. Debbie Buckner

GEORGIA'S WATER

Veteran Lawmaker Defends Georgia's Water

INTRODUCTION:

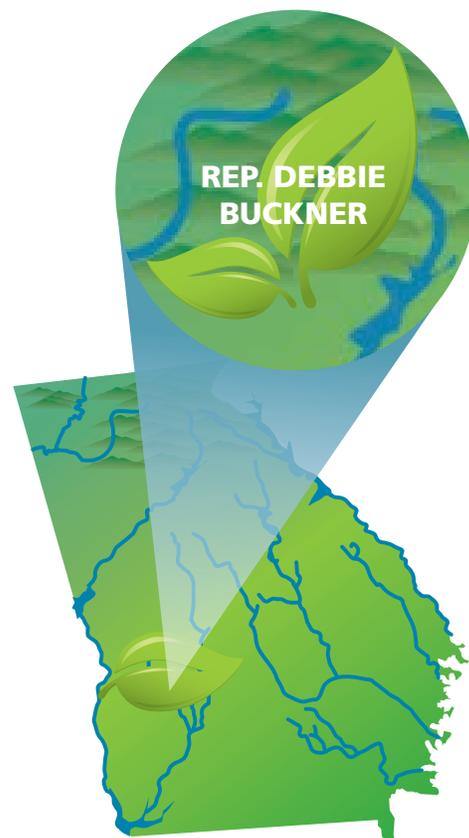
In September 1990, Debbie Buckner—then a public health professional—took a different route to the state capitol than the one she now takes as a state representative. That month she and five others marched for a week—joined by 200 others along the way—and covered 100 miles from Talbot County to Atlanta to protest the construction of a hazardous waste incinerator proposed near her home in Talbot County. Their target was Gov. Joe Frank Harris and legislators. Among the signs at the protest on the capital steps, one read: “God save us from Georgia Politics.” Ultimately, Buckner and the people of Taylor and Talbot stopped the incinerator. A decade later, that activism propelled the Columbus native into the state house herself. Now, a lawmaker for 17 years, Rep. Buckner is still fighting to protect Georgia's water and annually ranks among the top legislators in votes to defend the state's natural 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:

Long before Rep. Debbie Buckner (D-Junction City) was elected to office, she cut her teeth on environmental issues directly impacting her family's property and her community. The fight over the hazardous waste incinerator was not her first time trying to right a wrong.





With her husband, Mike Buckner, owner of Fielder’s Grist Mill, located on the headwaters of Patsiliga Creek in Talbot County, she saw first hand what happens when an upstream neighbor fails to protect the water flowing downstream. During the late 1970s, a nearby mining operation filled the couple’s millpond with sediment. The effort to stem that pollution instilled in her a keen understanding of our responsibility to downstream neighbors.

“That was my first encounter with that very important policy known as riparian rights,” she said.

In Georgia, it means that landowners own the right to use the water flowing through their property so long as that use doesn’t adversely interfere with the water quality and quantity for the owner downstream.

As a freshmen legislator in 2003, she voted against her own democratic leadership of the House Natural Resources Committee, opposing a controversial bill that would allow water permit holders to buy and sell those permits—a move that would have forever altered Georgia’s tradition of regulated riparian rights.

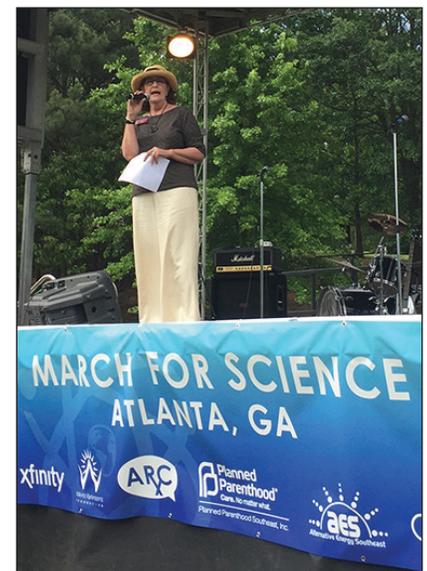
Since that bold—and successful—vote as a neophyte representative, she’s continued to vote her conscience to protect “downstreamers” and the state’s natural resources. Rep. Buckner routinely scores in the top percentile of environmental voting scorecards.

In recent sessions, her votes have supported better regulation of toxic coal ash; increased state funding for land conservation; protected local governments’ ability to collect fees that keep pollution out of rivers and streams; improved stewardship of the Flint River and Floridan aquifer; strengthened the state’s ability to respond to environmental emergencies; required landfill operators to notify local residents in the event of a release of contaminants or toxins; and helped preserve the character of state-owned Jekyll Island.

She has also worked tirelessly to prevent massive transfers of water from one river basin to another and improve the state’s stream buffer laws. As a Democrat in a Republican-controlled legislature, her ability to move legislation is limited, but over 17 years she has established herself as a respected and knowledgeable voice for Georgia’s water—one that is heard on both sides of the aisle.

“Water issues are not partisan,” she said. “It’s an upstream-downstream issue. We must have a mutual understanding that we all require clean water and we all need to be respectful of each other. To me that’s what regulated riparian rights is all about.”

At least now, she doesn’t have to walk 100 miles to be heard in Atlanta’s chambers of power.



Top: Rep. Debbie Buckner speaks from the well of the House of Representatives. The 17-year veteran lawmaker is known as respected and knowledgeable voice on Georgia’s water. Above: An environmental activist since the late 1980s, Rep. Debbie Buckner speaks at Atlanta’s March for Science demonstration.



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