Georgia's 2020

CLEAN 13

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Georgia Water Coalition's Clean 13 Highlights Public and Private Efforts to Protect Georgia's Water

The 13 entities highlighted in the Georgia Water Coalition's 2020 Clean 13 report are, each in their own way, contributing to cleaner rivers so that scenes like this one on the Flint River will be available to future generations.

For Georgia Water Coalition's more than 260 member organizations half the battle of protecting Georgia's water is helping Georgians understand and appreciate the state's water resources.

For some organizations, that means taking a group kayaking on a local river; for others it means guiding school children on hikes along a stream; and for still others, it means getting local civic groups involved in a creek cleanup.

Coalition members understand that for people to care about protecting the state's rivers, lakes, streams—along with the state's groundwater resources and coastal areas—they must experience them firsthand.

Or as famed natural historian David Attenborough has noted: "No one will protect what they don't care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

Within the stories of each of the individuals, organizations and businesses highlighted in this year's Clean 13 report runs that underlying theme: the need to help people enjoy, appreciate and take action to protect Georgia's water.

From a bold plan to create a 120-mile multi-modal trail along the Chattahoochee River to introduce the river to a new generation of stewards to workshops for county road maintenance workers in Southwest Georgia aimed at addressing sedimentation from the region's dirt roads, the entities included in this report are doing just that.

In the state's capital, Live Thrive Atlanta's Center for Hard to Recycle Material (CHaRM) offers residents a place to recycle everything from old paints to obsolete electronics. Since 2015, CHaRM has diverted more than 50 million pounds of hazardous chemicals and waste from landfills. CHaRM has helped Atlantans understand that recycling benefits urban streams and our rivers.

In Dublin, YKK AP, makers of aluminum windows, doors and architectural facades, is doing the same at the industrial level. While recycling all of its aluminum waste on site, YKK AP also recovers byproducts of its manufacturing process that are

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repurposed on site or sold off-site for other uses. Its energy efficiency measures in its 1.2-million square-feet facility serve as an example of energy savings that can be realized by community-wide adoption of something as simple as LED lighting.

In North Georgia, Yonah Mountain Vineyards, one of Georgia's growing number of wineries, is likewise setting a clean energy example with the installation in 2019 of a 360-panel solar array that powers much of the vineyard's operation. The sommoliers of solar have also installed a 14-station Tesla Destination charging station for electric cars.

Georgia's water resources play a critical role in the state's outdoor recreation economy. Georgia's outdoor recreation economy generates $27.3 billion in consumer spending and $1.8 billion in state and local taxes annually, while supporting some 238,000 jobs.

At Emory University, one of the country's leading research universities, the WaterHub, a first of its kind facility in the U.S., is showing students—and even international leaders— the benefits of small-scale, on-site water treatment facilities. The WaterHub, which looks like a large greenhouse, treats up to 400,000 gallons of sewage daily and provides 40 percent of the campus's daily water needs.

Across town in Marietta, Parsley's Catering, a 40-year-old family-owned business, has adopted green initiatives and encourages others in the food service sector to follow their lead. One of the few Atlanta area food providers certified by the Green Restaurant Association, Parsley's has embraced solar power and water-saving plumbing, converted to compostable and biodegradable plates and utensils and connected with local organic farms to provide its meats and produce.

In Southwest Georgia, the Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development Council, among many other initiatives, educates local county road crews on best practices for maintaining the region's many dirt roads—an effort that keeps dirt out of streams and protects imperiled aquatic wildlife. The Council is also producing a series of educational videos promoting tourism along the Flint River.

Across state from the Flint, the private, non-profit, 74-year-old Okefenokee Swamp Park, is also embarking on a tourism marketing effort with other local swamp attractions to bring more people to the swamp and convert more of them to swamp lovers. The effort couldn't be more timely as the swamp is now faced with new outside threats and needs all the defenders it can get.

Similarly, the Chattahoochee RiverLands project aims to make the Chattahoochee more accessible to communities across metro Atlanta. The proposed 120-mile multi-modal trail running from Buford Dam in Gwinnett County to Chattahoochee Bend State Park in Coweta County aims to bring citizens to the region's "waterfront" and enlist a new generation of river stewards.

Flying above all this action on the ground is SouthWings, an Asheville, North Carolina-based non-profit that provides free flights to environmental organizations in Georgia. In 2019, SouthWings' volunteer pilots flew 29 missions totaling

Georgia's agricultural and rural communities are highlighted in this year's report. Farmers across the state were instrumental in defeating legislation that would have invited industrial-scale agricultural waste disposal operations to rural Georgia.

some 87 hours of flight time. The flights served to educate decision makers and the public about issues impacting our water, ranging from coal ash disposal to oil spills along the coast.

Finally, in this year's Clean 13 report, the Georgia Water Coalition celebrates individuals and one organization that helped secure specific victories for Georgia's water.

The Fall-Line Alliance for Clean Energy (FACE), based in Washington County, celebrated the end of a decade-long effort to stop a coal-fired power plant planned near Sandersville. Earlier this year, state regulators refused to extend permits for the project. Plant Washington was the only coal-fired power plant still currently under consideration in the U.S. Since 2010, more than 170 proposed coal-fired power plants have been cancelled across the country.

In the state legislature, Sen. William Ligon (R-White Oak) introduced and secured passage of SB 123, a measure that closes a loophole in Georgia's coal ash disposal regulations. The new law will discourage out-of-state coal ash producers from dumping their waste in Georgia landfills. The retiring senator also leaves a legacy of protecting the Georgia coast and coastal rivers.

On the other side of the aisle, Sen. Freddie Powell Sims (D-Dawson) used her influence as the only Democratic senator representing a mostly rural district, to secure votes of the senate's full Democratic caucus in the heated battle over HB 545, a measure that would have harmed rural constituents by inviting industrial-scale animal feeding operations to rural communities.

Influencing Sen. Sims to take a stand against the bill was a vocal group of farmers, including many from her district. While lobbyists from the agri-business sector wield much influence in Sims' Southwest Georgia district, their endorsement of HB 545 was no match for these citizen activists, most of whom were traditionally, politically-right-leaning farmers. Forming an unlikely coalition with senate Democrats, they played an important role in defeating HB 545.

Together, the efforts of these "Clean 13" are adding up to cleaner rivers, stronger communities and a more sustainable future for Georgia.

The Georgia Water Coalition publishes this list not only to recognize these positive efforts on behalf of Georgia's water but also as a call to action for our state's leaders and citizens to review these success stories, borrow from them and emulate them.

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 260 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of Georgians.

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Live Thrive Atlanta

CHATTAHOOCHEE, FLINT, SOUTH RIVERS

Hard To Recycle Items Find New Life at In-Town Facility

INTRODUCTION:

Live Thrive Atlanta's Center for Hard to Recycle Materials (CHaRM) takes products that have ended their first useful life and repurposes or recycles them--everything from television sets to household chemicals. It is perhaps fitting then that the story of CHaRM's birth begins with an ending. When founder Peggy Whitlow's parents passed away she was left with an in-town home and Forsyth County farm—both filled with old household chemicals, garden pesticides and herbicides, not to mention the usual household appliances and other stuff accumulated over a lifetime. "I knew they shouldn't just go in the trash, but I couldn't find an outlet for them," said Whitlow. Frustrated by the dawning reality that a landfill would be the final resting place for these common, but sometimes hazardous, household items, she was inspired. "This is bigger that just cleaning out a house and trying to do the right thing," she said. And, thus her quest to recycle hard to dispose of materials began, taking her to recycling facilities from Athens, Georgia to Boulder, Colorado and back to Atlanta where CHaRM was born in 2010.

THE WATER BODIES:

The City of Atlanta is home to three rivers—the Chattahoochee, Flint, and South—plus countless neighborhood streams that feed these rivers. The Chattahoochee serves as the city's primary water source and one of the primary repositories of its treated sewage. Both the Flint and South rivers rise as springs near East Point. The Flint flows in culverts beneath Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport before coursing through Clayton, Fayette and Spalding counties; the South flows across South Atlanta, receiving the treated wastewater from much of Metro Atlanta on its journey to Jackson Lake and the Ocmulgee River. Life is rough for rivers and streams in urban areas—not just because of the treated sewage they receive. When greater than 20 percent of the land surface surrounding them is covered in concrete, asphalt and buildings, the health of these streams declines rapidly and they often become choked with litter that washes into them during rain events. Thus, the proper disposal, recycling or repurposing of common household products becomes critically important for stream health in urban locales like Atlanta.

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THE CLEAN:

Before Live Thrive Atlanta opened its CHaRM facility in 2010, metro Atlanta residents had few alternatives for disposing of items like household cleaners, lawn pesticides and herbicides, paint products, tires, toilets, carpets and even mattresses. The landfill was typically their final resting place. Now, those unwanted items stashed in Atlanta area attics, closets and basements are finding new life.

Since 2015, CHaRM has diverted more than 50 million pounds of hazardous chemicals and waste from landfills. In fact, more than 94 percent of the materials Atlanta area residents bring to CHaRM are recycled, repurposed or reengineered.

That sports equipment you don't use anymore? It goes to a thrift store and is used by someone new; tires? a local recycler incorporates them into asphalt that's being used to fill potholes on city streets; Styrofoam? That packaging material is repurposed into home insulation: electronics? they're broken down and mined for reusable material; paint? It's repurposed for community graffiti cleanups; old carpets? They get turned into more carpet and even car parts!

Top: Since 2015, Live Thrive Atlanta's Center for Hard to Recycle Materials (CHaRM) has diverted more than 50 million pounds of hazardous chemicals and waste from landfills. More than 94 percent of materials brought to the facility are recycled. Above: Live Thrive Atlanta depends on volunteers, donations and support from local governments. It regularly hosts school groups for tours of the facility to educate the public about the importance of recycling.

CHaRM's efforts support 120 manufacturers in Georgia that depend on recycled materials. Driven largely by the textile and paper industries, Georgia is number two in the nation when it comes to infrastructure for "end use" of recovered materials.

Recycling in Georgia is a $2.5 billion business that sustains more than 12,000 jobs and generates more than $200 million in state and local tax collections.

As Live Thrive Atlanta founder Peggy Whitlow said, "It's dollars and cents. Recycling is not just for tree huggers."

Despite all that money, however, the vagaries of the recycling markets make turning a profit in the recycling business difficult. CHaRM's model depends on donations, volunteers and support from local governments, but its existence creates cleaner and more sustainable communities by diverting waste from landfills and reducing illegal dumping.

Before CHaRM began collecting tires, the City of Atlanta typically dealt with up to 200,000 illegally dumped tires annually; those numbers have now been reduced to 25,000 to 75,000 annually. Whitlow estimates that the recyclables CHaRM has diverted from Atlanta's trash bins have saved the city $1.3 million in landfill tipping fees.

The original Hill Street CHaRM has been so successful that plans are underway to open a similar facility in DeKalb County. "People do care," Whitlow said. "Given the opportunity, they want to do the right thing. Every city should have a CHaRM."

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YKK AP

OCONEE RIVER

Dublin Manufacturer Stays On Sustainability Cutting Edge

INTRODUCTION:

Last year, when the Business Roundtable declared that the purpose of a corporation is not just to serve shareholders, but to "create value for all our stakeholders" it caused a stir. This statement from the country's most influential group of corporate CEOs seemed to signal that, among other things, these corporations would put caring for the environment on equal footing with making money. To which, YKK Corporation of America President Jim Reed responded: "What took so long?" YKK—the world's largest maker of zippers which operates facilities in Macon and Dublin—issued its first environmental pledge in 1994. Recently, it set sustainability goals for 2050 that include addressing climate change, water efficiency, waste reduction and protection of natural resources. YKK's Dublin Architectural Products (AP) facility, which makes aluminum windows, doors and other architectural facades, has long been on the cutting edge of sustainability practices, and now the company's 2050 environmental vision has workers there pushing the envelope further.

THE WATER BODY:

Coursing through the heart of Dublin where YKK AP operates, the Oconee River flows some 220 miles through Middle and South Georgia from Athens to near Lumber City where it meets the Ocmulgee to form the Altamaha—the state's largest river. The Altamaha system drains almost a quarter of Georgia's land before reaching the Georgia coast and emptying into the Atlantic near Brunswick and the famed Golden Isles. Along the way, the Oconee provides drinking water for some 300,000 Georgians. It also receives treated wastewater from nearly 200 municipal, industrial, commercial and agricultural operations. From the playful shoals of the Middle Oconee in Athens that attract kayakers and tubers to the river's oxbow lakes in the Coastal Plain that beckon anglers, it is a recreation hot spot.

THE CLEAN:

Since opening in 1992, engineers at YKK AP in Dublin have been on the cutting edge of sustainability. Rather than design a wastewater treatment system to Georgia's regulatory requirements, YKK adopted standards that would pass muster in California.

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Today, before sending its wastewater to the Dublin sewer system, it typically removes pollutants such as nickel, chrome and zinc to levels 80 to 90 percent below regulatory requirements. And, much of what is removed finds new life. For instance, aluminum byproducts from the waste stream are ultimately used in recycling paper.

Using less water has also been a priority. Within the past five years, YKK AP has adopted practices that have reduced water use by 16 percent.

Energy efficiency measures such as investing in LED lighting have reduced the 1.2-million square-foot facility's monthly power bill by about 15 percent, and YKK AP realizes 50 percent savings on natural gas in its melting and casting operations by employing regenerative burners.

As for the facility's primary raw material—aluminum—100 percent of aluminum waste is recycled on site, and workers there have reduced the amount of other waste sent to landfills by 40 percent. Since 2003, it has recycled 300 tons of waste paper.

For Chip Wilson, environmental group manager for YKK AP, who tracks water and energy use at the plant, the benefits are twofold. "When you see the meters ticking around here, it makes you think about it," he said. "It starts with saving money, but you find there's a lot of other byproducts that can be repurposed."

Wilson points to the installation of the facility's solvent still, an apparatus used to recover xylene, a paint solvent used in the manufacturing process. The still recoups 80 percent of the xylene for reuse in house while removing paint components that are incinerated off site for waste-to-energy use. Cost savings realized through the still paid for the initial investment in less than a year.

Now, engineers at the plant are exploring ways to recover and separate more of the elements in its wastewater stream for reuse in house or for sale to other industries. They're also investigating on-site waste-to-energy programs.

Said Wilson: "We all want to be on the cutting edge, but nobody wants to stand on the blade." If YKK AP's Dublin facility isn't standing on the blade, they are at least tip-toeing along it.

When workers are not in the factory, many of them can sometimes be found picking up trash at Oconee river landings or planting trees as part of YKK AP's support for Rivers Alive and Keep Dublin-Laurens Beautiful.

Top: The wastewater treatment system at YKK AP typically removes most pollutants to levels 80 to 90 percent below regulatory requirements and many of the byproducts removed are repurposed or recycled. Above: Workers at YKK AP in Dublin have reduced the amount of waste they send to the landfill by 40 percent. Since 2003, the facility has recycled 300 tons of waste paper.

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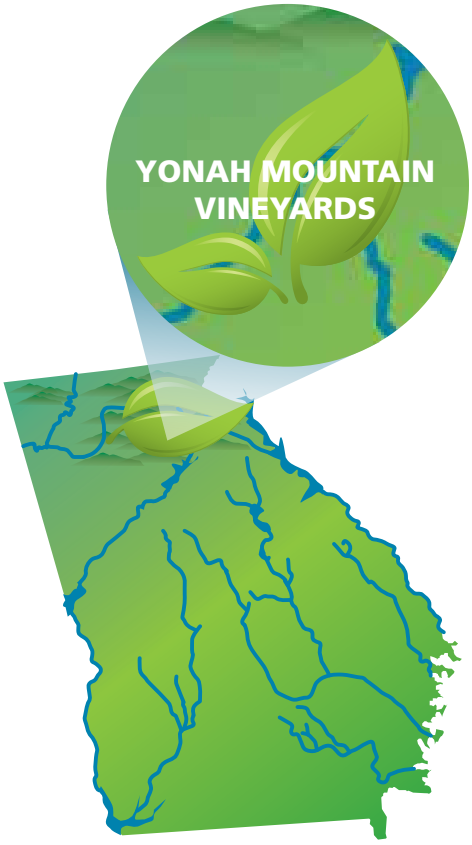
Yonah Mountain Vineyards

GEORGIA'S RIVERS

White County Vineyard Becomes Wine, Solar Destination

INTRODUCTION:

In 2005, when the Miller family purchased some 200 acres of land in White County with Yonah Mountain as a scenic backdrop, they intended to "harvest" sunlight to grow grapes and make wine. Now, 15 years later, they're not only excelling at growing grapes and producing award-winning wines, they're also harvesting the sun to provide much of their power needs. In 2019, Yonah Mountain Vineyards installed a 360-panel, $238,000 solar array that now meets more than half the business's electricity needs and serves as a model for others looking to invest in clean energy.



THE WATER BODY:

Georgia's rivers make power. At the state's coal, gas and nuclear power plants, water withdrawn from the Chattahoochee, Coosa, Etowah, Savannah, Altamaha and Ocmulgee rivers serves as cooling water in the steam-driven power generation process. In fact, thermoelectric power plants are the largest users of water in Georgia, demanding more than two billion gallons a day. While these water withdrawals stress river systems on the supply side, power plants' warm water discharges and toxins leading from coal ash ponds can harm the health of the rivers and aquatic wildlife. Meanwhile air emissions, especially from coal-fired power plants, contain tons of climate-warming greenhouse gases. Mercury is also released in these emissions and ultimately falls back to the ground. Once introduced to the environment, it enters the aquatic food chain, tainting the fish we eat with the toxin. Against these pollution problems and the growing demand for water for municipal supplies, clean energy like solar is playing an increasingly important role in protecting water resources.

THE CLEAN:

Georgia's solar energy industry is booming. Across the state, more that 2,600 MW of solar panels are in operation, ranking the state 9th in total solar installed. That's enough electricity to power more than 300,000 homes. The boom in solar is due in part to the falling cost of installation—a 38 percent drop in the last five years.

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The Miller family of Yonah Mountain Vineyards is among those riding the wave of lower costs for clean energy. While their array helps eliminate impacts to the state's rivers and reduce climate-warming pollutants, the installation is also a financial windfall. They expect to recoup their nearly quarter-million-dollar investment in utility bill savings within eight years.

"We know climate change is happening; we know it is real. So, there was no reason not to build the vineyard facilities so that it would help the planet," said Eric Miller, general manager and the son of founders, Bob and Jane Miller.

The vineyard's efforts at promoting clean energy don't end with their solar array. The White County facility is also home to the largest Tesla Destination Charging location in North Georgia, offering 14 plug-in stations for electric vehicles, including some that are fed by the solar installation.

But solar is just part of the vineyard's sustainability portfolio. Energy-efficient lighting in facilities, a partnership with the Georgia Beekeeping Association that maintains a bee farm on site, a bottle recycling program and a conservation easement to preserve the property are among the other practices the Miller family has employed.

With Georgia's wine and solar industries simultaneously experiencing tremendous growth, the Millers now find themselves as advocates for both. A year after the install, the wine experts are not just sommoliers; they are sommoliers of solar.

Said Miller: "The quickest way to get people on board with solar is to talk about the financial incentives. If they don't care about the planet they do care about the money."

But, there's still room for growth. Though expanding rapidly, solar power provides less than three percent of Georgia's total electricity.

Top: Yonah Mountain Vineyards produces its wine using grapes grown on about 20 acres. Solar panels occupy a half acre nearby and provide a large portion of the business's electricity needs. Top left: The wine cave at Yonah Mountain Vineyards is lighted using power generated from the business's 360-panel solar array. Above: The distinctive profile of Yonah Mountain looms over the solar array at Yonah Mountain Vineyards. The 360-panel solar array installed in 2019 is expected to pay for itself in utility bill savings within eight years.

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CLEAN WATER HEROES

Emory University

CHATTAHOOCHEE & SOUTH RIVERS

WaterHub Relieves Pressure on Water & Sewer Infrastructure

INTRODUCTION:

In the summer of 2008, Atlanta was reeling from two years of drought. As water use restrictions tightened, water supplies creeped perilously close to running dry. It was a frightening wake up call for a metro region of some six million residents that depended on the diminutive Chattahoochee for its primary water supply. Of course, Emory University in DeKalb County, known as one of the leading research universities in the nation, was already ahead of the curve. Three years prior to that epic drought, the university had already set a goal of cutting its water use in half. By Earth Day 2015, officials were dedicating the school's WaterHub, an on-campus water treatment/recycling facility that during the past five years has helped supply 40 percent of the school's water needs. The first of its kind facility in the U.S., it now serves as a model for other communities looking to conserve water and reduce stress on water and sewer infrastructure.

THE WATER BODY:

Atlanta's water supply and wastewater treatment systems rely heavily on the Chattahoochee and South rivers. The Chattahoochee supplies drinking water for 40 percent of Georgia's citizens, including most of those living in metro Atlanta. In fact, no other major city in the U.S. depends upon a smaller river basin for its primary water source. Meanwhile both the Chattahoochee and South are the primary destination for effluent from sewage treatment facilities in DeKalb and Fulton counties. The Emory WaterHub relieves pressure on these rivers, and by removing and recycling sewage from the collection system, the Hub also contributes to the improved health of urban streams like Peachtree and Snapfinger Creeks, which are susceptible to sewage overflows during heavy rain events.

THE CLEAN:

Amidst Emory's picturesque, tree-lined campus sits a sewage treatment plant, but you'd never recognize it as such. That's because the odor-free WaterHub looks like an ordinary greenhouse, complete with tropical plants reaching up to the ceiling of the glass-roofed complex.

The WaterHub, operated by Sustainable Water, a water reclamation technology provider, diverts sewage from DeKalb County's system and cleans it with the help of organisms that utlilize biomimicry to break

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down pollutants. The reclaimed water is then used to heat and cool campus buildings through the school's steam and chiller plants and used for flushing toilets in some residence halls.

The University now supplies 40 percent of its water through the system.

The benefits of the system ripple through the campus and across Atlanta. Aside from slashing the University's water and sewer bill by millions, the WaterHub reduces water withdrawal demand on the Chattahoochee River by up to 146 million gallons annually.

And, by treating up to 400,000 gallons of sewage daily, it also reduces the risk of sewage overflows in DeKalb County's public sewage system—a problem that has long polluted streams like Snapfinger and Peachtree creeks.

The facility also accrues energy savings, and not just because it is partially powered by solar panels. Treating and moving water to customers is an energy intensive process and by recycling water on site, the Hub reduces power consumption and greenhouse gases.

It also serves as a teaching tool. Chemistry and public health students conduct lab work at the WaterHub, and the school provides regular tours of the facility, hosting everyone from school children to international leaders.

More than 5,000 people have toured the facility since 2015, and they are taking note. Last year, Duke University announced it would build its own WaterHub.

Emory wants more to follow their lead, for the WaterHub addresses not just water, sewer and energy challenges; it also tackles social justice and equity issues.

"Too often large wastewater infrastructure projects are placed in neighborhoods that are poor and voiceless. They're unattractive and stinky and lower property values. This model shows that wastewater treatment doesn't have to be that way," said Ciannat Howett, Associate Vice President of Sustainability, Resilience and Economic Inclusion. "It's our waste. We created it and we're responsible for it. We're not going to pollute someone else's neighborhood."

Top: Though the Emory WaterHub is a sewage treatment facility, you'd never know it. The greenhouse-style structure is aesthetically pleasing and odor free. Left: The Emory WaterHub serves as an educational tool for the university. Chemistry and public health students conduct labs at the Hub. Above: Among those who have visited the WaterHub is former USEPA administrator, Gina McCarthy. Emory's WaterHub tours have inspired others to adopt the model. Last year, Duke University announced plans to develop its own WaterHub.

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CLEAN WATER HEROES

Parsley's Catering

GEORGIA'S RIVERS, STREAMS AND LAKES

Marietta-based Caterer & Event Center Promotes Sustainability, Waste Reduction

INTRODUCTION:

The stage is a familiar one: the company picnic, family reunion or special event. The scene is all too common: after the big meal is served, the garbage receptacles overflow with discarded Styrofoam and plastic plates, cups and utensils. The drama ends predictably: in a landfill where the petroleum byproducts will live for generations.

Marietta-based Parsley's Catering, which services hundreds of such events annually, has seen that play, and over the last two decades, the family-owned business has worked to change the narrative. The company has invested in recyclable and compostable serving products, clean energy installations, water saving plumbing fixtures, support of locally-produced and sustainable farm products and even "green" cleaning supplies. Today, Parsley's is one of just a handful of Atlanta area food service providers certified by the Green Restaurant Association, a national organization that promotes sustainable practices amongst restaurants and caterers.

THE WATER BODY:

With more than 70,000 miles of rivers and streams and vast reserves of groundwater, Georgia is blessed with abundant water resources. These water bodies give us drinking water, assimilate municipal waste, power business and industry and provide us with countless recreational opportunities. In fact, the Outdoor Industry Association estimates that Georgia's outdoor recreation economy generates $27.3 billion in consumer spending and $1.8 billion in state and local taxes annually, while supporting some 238,000 jobs. Yet, these play places are threatened, not simply by water withdrawals and sewage discharges. Plastic waste and litter can be found on virtually every waterway in Georgia, diminishing recreational experiences and posing a threat to wildlife and stream health.

THE CLEAN:

When Marc Sommers began working in his family's catering operation in the early 2000s, he borrowed from his experiences in Portland,

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Oregon where he worked in a pizza parlor that sourced its cheese locally and created its dough from spent grain generated at a local brewery. The sustainability-focused business atmosphere left its mark on him.

Upon returning to Georgia he found the sustainability movement behind the West Coast and decided to do something about it. “My goal was to create a company that was sustainable, was supporting the local economy and was focused on the bigger picture,” he said.

Out were Styrofoam and petroleum-based products; in were compostable and biodegradable plates and utensils. That was just the beginning.

Upon purchasing the Gardens at Kennesaw Mountain, a historic home and event venue on four acres near the base of Kennesaw Mountain, Parsley’s upgraded the facility with waterless urinals and water-saving sinks, toilets and dishwashing equipment. The company also installed a solar array to increase its reliance on clean energy, implemented a composting program to eliminate waste to landfills and converted to “green” cleaning products.

Parsley’s realizes water savings of more than 200,000 gallons annually and the solar panels have offset the equivalent of 23,000 pounds of greenhouse gases since their installation.

Borrowing a final page from his days in Portland, Sommers sought out local organic farms for his produce. Meats and cheeses now come from Riverview Farms near Resaca and Sequatchie Cove Creamery in Tennessee; vegetables come from Rise N’ Shine Farms near Calhoun.

These changes qualified Parsley’s Catering for two-star certification by the Green Restaurant Association, one of only a handful of Atlanta area eateries to qualify for such designation from the national organization.

Using his own business as an example, Sommers now encourages other restaurateurs and caterers to “go green.” “Our hope is to provide a road map for others,” he said. “Sustainable practices can translate into increased savings and increased revenue as more businesses require at least a minimum of sustainably-focused products.”

Top: Workers prep food for another Parsley’s event. The Marietta-based caterer is one of just a handful of Atlanta area food service providers to qualify for certification by the national Green Restaurant Association, which promotes sustainability practices amongst caterers and restaurants. Left: A solar array at Parsley’s event venue in Marietta has offset the equivalent of 23,000 pounds of greenhouse gases since its installation. Above: Fresh tomatoes fill a plate during a Parsley’s Catering event. The Marietta-based caterer sources its vegetables, meats and cheeses from local, organic farms.

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Golden Triangle RC&D Council

CHATTAHOOCHEE, FLINT & OCHLOCKONEE RIVERS

Locals Help Locals Protect Land and Water in Southwest Georgia

INTRODUCTION:

Since 1962 with the passage of the federal Food and Agriculture Act, Resource Conservation and Development projects have empowered locals to improve conditions in rural communities through better soil, water and land conservation practices. In 2011, budget cuts eliminated direct federal funding to the councils, but today many councils persist as non-profit organizations supported through contracts, state and federal grants and private funding. Georgia is home to 11 councils, but few are as active as the Golden Triangle RC&D which operates in 15 Southwest Georgia counties. The work of the staff at Golden Triangle—which ranges from mitigating erosion on the region's many dirt roads to improving irrigation efficiency on local farms, has directly benefited the Flint, Chattahoochee and Ochlockonee rivers and improved the lives of their rural neighbors.

THE WATER BODY:

The Chattahoochee, Flint and Ochlockonee rivers—along with the Floridan aquifer that interacts with them—are critically-important to the agriculture-based economy of the Southwest Georgia, irrigating hundreds of thousands of acres in the region. Producers there grow a large share of the state's more than $13 billion in annual farm products sales. The rivers and creeks of the area are home to several mussel species on the brink of extinction. Agricultural water withdrawals causing reduced stream flows and sedimentation from land uses that disrupt mussel habitat, reproduction and feeding are among the factors in the demise of these species. Aside from having colorful names like purple bankclimber and shinyrayed pocketbook, these federally protected creatures play an important role in maintaining stream health by filtering nutrients from the water. They are yet another example of the nexus between sustainable water and land management and the health of Georgia's rivers.

THE CLEAN:

Golden Triangle RC&D Council is the literal boots on the ground in Southwest Georgia addressing some of the most pressing land and water management issues impacting the region's economy as well as stream health and imperiled aquatic species.

Among its programs is an effort to tackle erosion and sedimentation from unpaved roads that damages area streams—there's upwards of 1500

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dirt roads in the Golden Triangle's 15-county service area. Under an agreement with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Georgia's Environmental Protection Division, the Council conducts regular technical workshops with county road maintenance crews and completes erosion control projects to reduce the flow of dirt into streams.

Earlier this year, state regulators tasked the Council as the lead organization in updating the Georgia Better Back Road Field Manual, a guide to best management techniques for controlling sedimentation from dirt roads.

The Council has also secured grants to improve farm irrigation efficiency. This summer it embarked on a program to install soil moisture sensors on area farms to help producers adjust and target their irrigation, putting water only where it is needed. It's a first step in more widespread use of this water-saving technology.

For the past nine years, the region's imperiled mussels have also gotten the Council's direct attention. Through a partnership with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Georgia's Environmental Protection Division, a stream flow augmentation facility is maintained on Spring Creek to protect endangered mussels.

While conducting these projects, Council staff is also involved in water resource education. It partners annually with Georgia Pacific for a Waterways Festival in Early County; supports a summer H2O camp for school children at the University of Georgia C.M. Stripling Irrigation Research Park in Mitchell County; participates in Rivers Alive cleanups; and partners with Flint Riverkeeper and the Flint RiverQuarium to enlist citizens in the state's Adopt-A-Stream program.

Along the Chattahoochee River in Early County, it even developed an outdoor classroom and interpretive signs in Fannie Askew Williams Park at Coheelee Creek, site of one of Georgia's remaining covered bridges.

Beginning last year, the Council embarked on a project to produce a series of videos highlighting the cultural and natural history of the Flint River basin. The goal is to educate communities about the importance of the river and promote tourism along its route. A partnership with the Georgia Water Planning & Policy Center at Albany State University and Flint Riverkeeper was created to accomplish this task.

Involved in water and land protection on multiple fronts, the Council is incrementally making a difference.

"It's drop by drop; every drop counts. You get there one drop at a time," said Rhonda Gordon, Executive Director. "A little here and a little there, it all adds up. Helping people understand why it's important to keep the watershed clean—that's important to us and we know we are making a difference."

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Gordon Rogers, *Flint Riverkeeper*, 912-223-6761, gordon@flintriverkeeper.org

Top: Streambank restoration projects are one of the many ways that Golden Triangle RC&D staff are working to improve stream health and habitat for imperiled mussel species in Southwest Georgia. Left: Educating youth at the Georgia Pacific Waterways Festival in Early County, Golden Triangle RC&D Council works to teach school children about the importance of the region's water resources.

Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

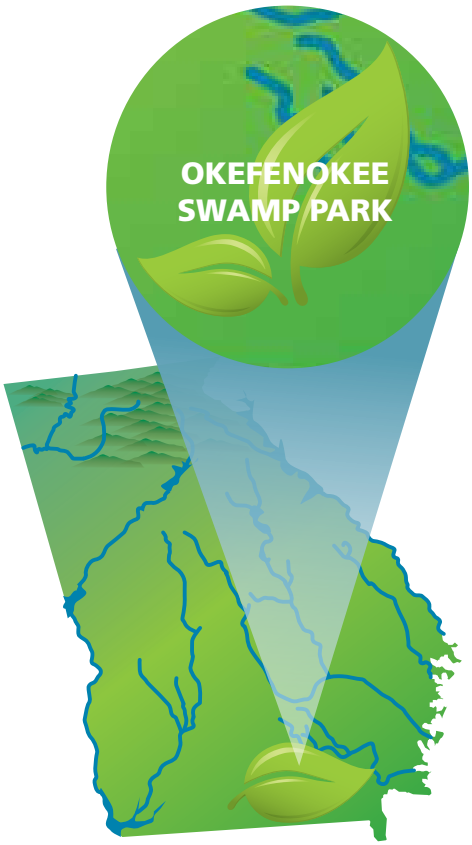
Okefenokee Swamp Park

OKEFENOKEE SWAMP

Historic Park Supports Research, Education, Eco-Tourism

INTRODUCTION:

Of Georgia's seven natural wonders, the Okefenokee is the most vast, most wild and most fabled—some 440,000 aces of primeval wilderness—the largest wilderness area in Georgia and the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern U.S. It is not a place conducive to drive-by tourism. To see and experience it, you must enter it—most easily by boat. Since 1946, Okefenokee Swamp Park, a private, non-profit organization created by swamp boosters from the Waycross area, has introduced millions of visitors from around the world to the swamp. The park provides boat and walking tours of the swamp, wildlife education programs and wildlife research. Recently, it has embarked on a marketing plan with the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Stephen C. Foster State Park to bring more people to the swamp to learn about and appreciate its wonders—a critical public education component as the health and beauty of the swamp is threatened by outside forces.



THE WATER BODY:

The "land of trembling earth," the Okefenokee Swamp encompasses nearly 700 square miles of Clinch, Ware, and Charlton counties in Georgia and Baker County in Florida. Considered the largest blackwater wetland in the U.S., it has been protected by the federal government since 1937, has been named a Wetland of International Importance, designated as a National Natural Landmark and is listed as a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. A biological treasure trove, it harbors more than 600 species of plants, 40 mammals, 50 reptiles, and 60 amphibians. More than 200 species of birds have been identified within the swamp, including the federally protected red cockaded woodpecker and wood stork. Beneath the surface of the swamp's tea-colored water can be found 34 species of fish. The swamp also holds the headwaters of the Suwannee and St. Marys Rivers. A place like no other, the Okefenokee is used by some 600,000 people annually who boat, bird, fish and hunt amongst its moss-draped cypress trees and lily-padded lakes.

THE CLEAN:

At Okefenokee Swamp Park, they are used to aweing visitors. Alligators bellow at one another; wood storks walk through blackwater on stilt-like legs; turtles bask on logs; frogs join a chorus of chirps and croaks.

Georgia's 2020 CLEAN 13

"People tend to get real quiet when they enter the swamp," said Kim Bednarek, the park's Executive Director, "It's a very magical place."

Interestingly, despite the swamp's uniqueness and the growing interest in "eco-tourism," annual visitorship at the park has declined noticeably since the 1970s when I-95 began syphoning Florida-bound tourists off U.S. 1 in Waycross which ran past the entrance to the park. The result of the changing transportation landscape is a reduction in the number of people who are aware of the swamp's wonders and willing to advocate for its protection.

That's one reason Okefenokee Swamp Park has begun partnering with the National Wildlife Refuge, Stephen C. Foster State Park and Valdosta State University to develop a comprehensive marketing strategy for swamp-based tourism. The effort dovetails with the park's ultimate goal: "for the public to develop an appreciation for the wildlife, culture and natural beauty of the Land of Trembling Earth."

Recently, that goal has taken on a sense of urgency with the proposed development of a titanium mine in Charlton County that could impact swamp water levels—and thus, swamp-based tourism.

As the Park works to bring more people to the swamp, it continues its tradition of education and research. In addition to adults and family groups, it annually hosts thousands of school children on field trips, presents daily live animal shows and boat excursions, and regularly conducts "Okefenokology" classes that highlight the natural and cultural history of the swamp.

The park's core research project is conducted in partnership with the University of Georgia whose students and faculty track, observe and capture some of the swamp's more than 10,000 alligators to expand knowledge of the animal's behavior and genetics. Part of this research involves placing satellite trackers on the alligators.

Should you find yourself in southeast Georgia, Okefenokee Swamp Park's boosters would urge you leave the superhighway and find your way to Waycross and the 74-year-old park. But, first prepare yourself to be awed.

Top: Boating trails leaving from Okefenokee Swamp Park provide entry into the nearly 700 square-miles of primeval wilderness. The park conducts daily boat tours into the swamp. Left: One of the Okefenokee's more than 10,000 alligators. When Okefenokee Swamp Park first opened in 1946, alligators in the swamp had been hunted almost to extinction. Above: In addition to providing boat excursions into the swamp, Okefenokee Swamp Park maintains boardwalks for pedestrian access, including one to this observation tower, providing a bird's eye view of the swamp.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Chattahoochee RiverLands

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

120-Mile Multi-Modal Trail Connects Communities, Residents to River

INTRODUCTION:

New York City has the Hudson River; Miami has South Beach; Los Angeles—Venice Beach. For land-locked Atlanta, the Chattahoochee is the city's water play place. From the days of the Ramblin' Raft Race in the early 1970s to the development of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area into the 1980s, Atlantans have long had a love affair with the river…at least part of it. Downstream from the national park, sewage treatment plants discharge millions of gallons of treated waste to the river, and for decades metro Atlanta's inadequate sewage infrastructure fouled the river. Until recently, Atlantans typically turned their backs to that section of river. Now, however, after years of progress in fixing sewer problems, the river is in recovery, and the Chattahoochee RiverLands vision now hopes to link those previously forgotten sections of the river with the long-beloved national park using a 125-mile multi-modal trail. The trail will stitch together communities from Gwinnett to Coweta counties, featuring parks, river access points and connecting trails that bring residents to the river's edge.

THE WATER BODY:

Coursing 434 miles from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Florida state line, the Chattahoochee is Georgia's longest and most important river. It supplies drinking water for about 40 percent of the state's population and carries away the treated waste of those same citizens. Its water generates electricity at multiple hydro-power dams as well as at gas and nuclear-powered facilities located along its banks. Paper mills and chicken processing plants, among other industries, also depend on its flow. Meanwhile it is home to an incredible array of wildlife: 104 fish species, 24 aquatic turtles and, historically, as many as 45 species of freshwater mussels. Especially for those in the metro area, it is an outdoor recreation mecca. The Chattahoohcee River National Recreation Area hosts more than three million visitors annually that float the river's gentle rapids, cast for trout in its cold water and jog, walk and bike on riverside trails.

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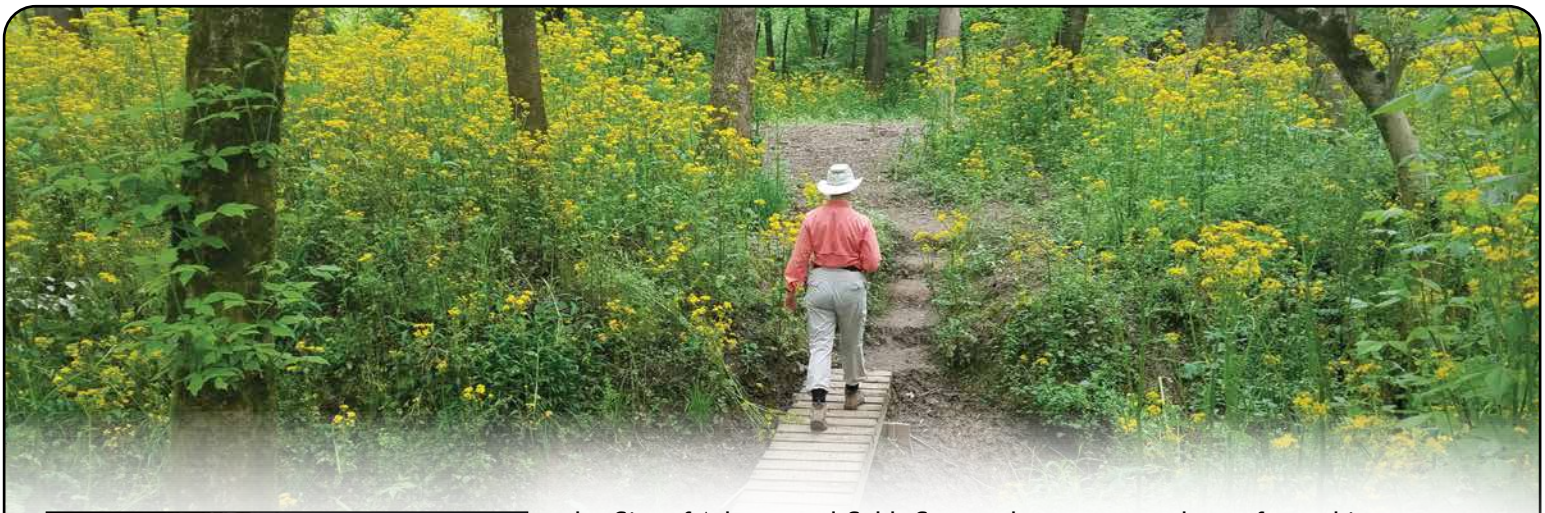
THE CLEAN:

With the revival of the river downstream of Atlanta, the Chattahoochee RiverLands vision has taken hold. A recently published $1.5 million study, funded by the Trust for Public Land, the Atlanta Regional Commission,



the City of Atlanta and Cobb County, lays out a road map for making some 100-miles of the Chattahoochee into "metro Atlanta's defining public space."

The plan calls for construction of a 125-mile multi-modal trail along the river, connecting to multiple public parks and to "tributary" trails—like the popular Silver Comet--that will link to nearby neighborhoods, cities and public transportation. Meanwhile, new river access points will be developed to extend the already existing 48-mile Chattahoochee River National Water Trail. These boat launches will make accessible some 56 miles of the river for boating, floating, fishing and swimming. When completed the greenway will be the largest of its kind in the state—the equivalent of four Atlanta BeltLines stitched together.

The first phases of the long-term vision are already taking shape as various stakeholders develop individual projects. Cobb County will soon construct nearly two miles of path between Mableton Parkway and Veterans Memorial Highway and a new boat launch near the confluence of Nickajack Creek and the Chattahoochee. Ultimately, 19 cities and seven counties will play roles in completing the RiverLands project which is estimated to cost about $1 billion—about the same cost as the new interchange that the state is currently building at Ga. 400 and I-285.

For the river, it's a miraculous change of course. "Thirty years ago, you wouldn't have wanted to be along the river downstream of Atlanta," said Walt Ray, the Trust for Public Land's Michael J. Egan Chattahoochee Conservation Fellow. "For that reason, the river has been well hidden. This project will allow metro Atlanta to discover its waterfront."

For the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the project is a continuation of efforts that it began more than 25 years ago. Since the 1990s, TPL has protected some 18,000 acres along the river, including some 80 miles of riverfront for public use.

Aside from connecting communities and providing transportation and recreation alternatives, the RiverLands project ultimately aims to connect residents with the river—a goal summed up in the RiverLands report that borrows the words from famed natural historian, David Attenborough: "No one will protect what they don't care about and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

Said the TPL's Ray: "That's the genius of the RiverLands. It will introduce the river to a whole new generation of stewards."

Top: In addition to the primary 120-mile trail, the Chattahoochee RiverLands project includes plans for "tributary trails" that will connect with neighborhoods and communities along the river. Left: The Chattahoochee is Georgia's longest and most important river, supplying drinking water for about 40 percent of the state's population. The Chattahoochee RiverLands project aims to enable more Georgians to experience the river in person. Above: Artist's renderings of the Chattahoochee RiverLands project show the 120-mile trail running from Buford Dam in Gwinnett County to Chattahoochee Bend State Park in Coweta County.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

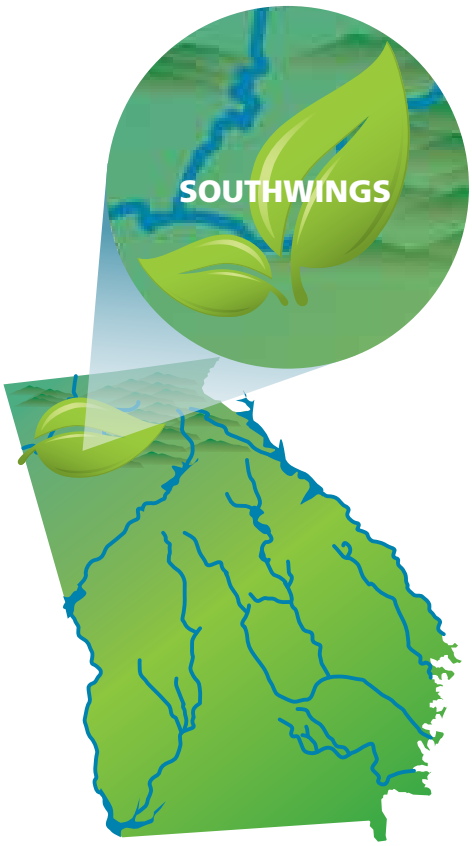
SouthWings

GEORGIA'S WATER

Flight Program Provides Landscape-Scale Perspective on Water Issues

INTRODUCTION:

In 1968 during the first manned flight to the moon's orbit, NASA astronaut Bill Anders snapped a photo of Earth that would come to be known as Earthrise—the first color image of the Earth shot from beyond it. That image forever changed our perspective on the planet. It was a portrait of our home so stunning and starkly beautiful that it is credited in part with propelling the environmental movement. Today, SouthWings, an Asheville, North Carolina-based organization, continues that tradition of perspective changing from the sky…though a little closer to home than the moon. The organization's volunteer pilots carry advocates, journalists and decision makers on flights that provide a landscape-scale view of issues impacting our water, air and land. In Georgia, SouthWings pilots have provided dozens of flights in recent years addressing issues as diverse as coal ash disposal and mining near the Okefenokee Swamp. For members of the Georgia Water Coalition, the photographs, videos, and discussions with policy makers stemming from SouthWings flights have been critical tools in changing perspectives and protecting Georgia's water.



THE WATER BODY:

As the Earthrise photograph so profoundly illustrated, Earth is the water planet. Water covers 71 percent of the Earth's surface, yet less than one percent of the planet's water is found in our rivers, lakes and streams. In Georgia, there are 14 major river basins, more than 70,000 miles of streams and rivers and 425,000 acres of lakes. The Georgia coast is home to 400,000 acres of coastal marshes that fringe five large estuaries where the fresh water of the Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha, Satilla and St. Marys mixes with the Atlantic Ocean. From the ground, the state's vast network of water seems disconnected, but from the bird's eye view afforded by SouthWings' flights, the interconnectedness is revealed—between land and water, creek and river, river and ocean.

THE CLEAN:

In the last 15 years, SouthWings volunteer pilots have provided 179 free flights to assist Georgia organizations in protecting the state's water, land and air. In the past year alone, SouthWings volunteer pilots conducted 29 flights in Georgia, logging 87 hours of flight time.

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When the Golden Ray cargo ship capsized in St. Simons Sound, Altamaha Riverkeeper enlisted Southwings in flights to monitor the leaking ship and provide aerial perspective of the oil spill for journalists. When the Coosa River Basin Initiative needed to take legislators on an aerial tour of coal ash ponds, SouthWings took flight. When Georgia River Network and Suwannee Riverkeeper needed to check up on a proposed mining site threatening the Okefenokee, SouthWings provided the reconnaissance.

Whether monitoring active sites of pollution, showing legislators the impacts of policy decisions or giving media the opportunity to better understand an issue, SouthWings' flights serve as a flying classroom.

"In one short flight, you get a full set of information and the inspiration you need to change things," said Meredith Dowling, SouthWings Associate Executive Director. "It allows you to see things that weren't previously visible."

For Georgia's environmental organizations, the service is a godsend. "They are awesome," said Altamaha Riverkeeper Fletcher Sams. "Most of the work we do begins with them, and we would not be where we are today without them."

In the past year, SouthWings has helped Altamaha Riverkeeper document issues associated with the Rayonier Advanced Materials chemical pulp mill in Jesup; Georgia Power Company's Plant Scherer coal-fired power plant near Juliette; and the capsized Golden Ray cargo ship in St. Simons Sound.

While documenting pollution problems through photographs and video is integral to the organization's mission, getting decision makers in the air can have an even greater impact.

"The ability to have conversations as we are looking at the issue from a landscape scale—that's the magic of flying," said Dowling. "You can't see how vulnerable we are until you get above it."

For Coosa River Basin Initiative Executive Director and Riverkeeper, Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman, who accompanied local legislators on flyovers in their districts that included views of coal ash ponds, the short aerial tours built relationships and awareness of issues. The flights paid dividends as local legislators supported important legislation regulating coal ash that ultimately was adopted.

Top: SouthWings provided aerial reconnaissance of coal-fired power plants from Plant Bowen in North Georgia to Plant Scherer in Middle Georgia in support of the Georgia Water Coalition's efforts to introduce and adopt new legislation regulating coal ash. Left: SouthWings volunteer pilot Woody Beck with Rep. Matt Gambill, left, and Rep. Katie Dempsey during a day of flying in the Cartersville and Rome area. Coosa River Basin Initiative Executive Director Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman accompanied the legislators on a flyover of their districts, including views of coal ash ponds. The legislators later supported important coal ash regulations.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

Fall-Line Alliance for a Clean Environment

OCONEE AND OGEECHEE RIVERS

Grassroots Citizens Group Halts Coal-Fired Power Plant in Middle Georgia

INTRODUCTION:

If an enterprising Hollywood screenwriter was looking for the next Erin Brockovich-style enviro-drama, they'd do well to investigate the saga of Plant Washington, a coal-fired power plant in Washington County originally proposed in 2008. It has it all. Power, corruption and a group of small-town activists who risked their standing amongst family, friends and neighbors in Sandersville to fend off what may be the last coal-fired power plant ever proposed in the U.S.. Earlier this year, activists with the Fall-Line Alliance for a Clean Environment (FACE) celebrated as state regulators pulled the plug on permits needed to begin construction on the 850-megawatt plant which has languished for years as financing for the project was withdrawn and its high-profile boosters became entangled in scandals. As power utilities shutter coal-fired plants in favor of cleaner and cheaper energy alternatives, Plant Washington was the only coal plant in the nation still under consideration.

THE WATER BODY:

Plant Washington would have been built between the Ogeechee and Oconee rivers and would have demanded some 16 million gallons of water a day—taken from groundwater that sustains flows in the Ogeechee or directly from the Oconee River via a 20-mile pipeline. Its coal ash waste would have been disposed of perilously close to wetlands feeding the Ogeechee. The blackwater Ogeechee remains one of Georgia's only free-flowing rivers, having no dams along its mainstem as it winds some 245 miles to the Georgia coast at Ossabaw Island. Feeding a lush and vast floodplain and coastal marsh, nearly 25 percent of the land in the Ogeechee basin is considered wetlands. The Oconee is part of the larger Altamaha River basin. With its headwaters streams—the Middle and North Oconee—surrounding Athens, it flows some 220 miles to its confluence with the Ocmulgee near Lumber City to form the Altamaha.

THE CLEAN:

In 2008, Power4Georgians, the consortium of Electric Membership Corporations led by Cobb EMC, gathered local leaders in Washington County to announce its coal-powered project. At that meeting, Dean Alford of Allied Energy Services, the company tasked with building the plant, said, "There'll be some push back from some environmentalists in Atlanta, but, don't worry, we're going to build this plant."

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CLEAN 13

Little did Alford know, among those at the meeting were local citizens that would soon find themselves as frontline "environmentalists."

Within a few months, Katherine Cummings and Cathy Mayberry, who attended that initial meeting, were soon joined by other concerned citizens. Together, they organized standing-room only community meetings and local opposition was born.

It was not easy in small-town Sandersville, Georgia's kaolin capital, where the community was hungry for new jobs and economic development. Backing the project was one of the town's most powerful and influential families, the Tarbuttons--kaolin and railroad barons who would profit from selling some of their land for the project and by hauling coal to the plant

Cummings, who headed a non-profit organization supporting rural health initiatives and which depended on state support, was threatened with the loss of public funding. "I was told to decide between my job and fighting a coal plant on my own time," she said. The local power brokers had influence at the state level. Others in the opposition were ostracized in social circles and even at church.

Yet, FACE members persevered. Working with a coalition of other groups, including Ogeechee Riverkeeper, Altamaha Riverkeeper, GreenLaw, Southern Environmental Law Center, Georgia Sierra Club, Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, Environment Georgia, Sapelo Foundation and the Rockefeller Family Fund, they appealed permits, testified at hearings and educated the community on the risks posed by the plant.

As electricity demand flattened and gas and renewables became cheaper, Electric Membership Corporations withdrew their support, leaving Cobb EMC and Allied Energy Services as the primary partners.

Dwight Brown, the Cobb EMC chief executive officer that formed Power4Georgians, was indicted on racketeering charges in 2011. Power4Georgians dissolved in 2017. Alford, a former state legislator and Governor-appointed member of the Board of Regents, was also charged with racketeering in 2019. The house of corruption backing Plant Washington crumbled under its own weight.

Cummings, who has now moved to the Atlanta area but whose family remains in Washington County, said of the experience: "It allowed all of us to be our best selves. It was an opportunity to live out our values in a very public way."

In 2014, Washington County welcomed a $30-million, 40-acre solar project producing 7.7 megawatts. Cobb EMC is now the primary purchaser of the power. Since 2010, more than 170 proposed coal-fired power plants have been cancelled across the country. Meanwhile, FACE remains active in the Sandersville community.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Top: FACE organized youth and adults to distribute information about Plant Washington at local events, including the Kaolin Festival in Sandersville. Left: Throughout the decade-long battle over Plant Washington, FACE educated the public about the impacts of coal-fired power plants, including the release of mercury to the aquatic food chain. "Clean Energy; No Coal Plant" yard signs could be seen all over the area.

Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

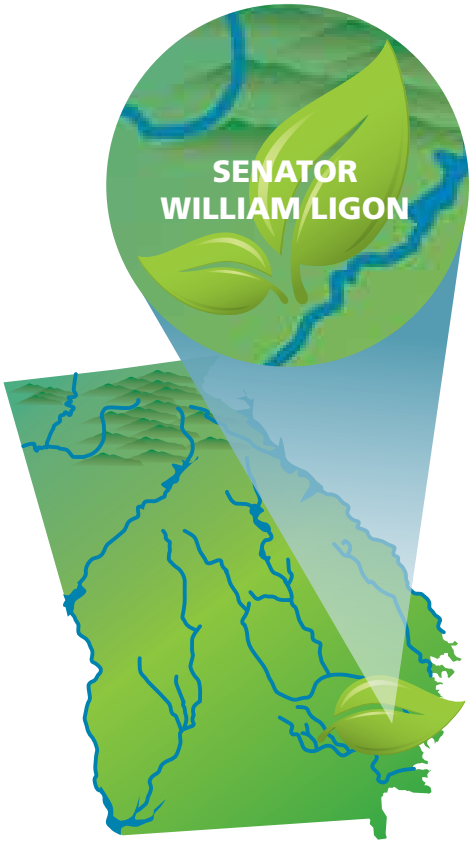
Sen. William Ligon

GEORGIA'S COAST & COASTAL RIVERS

Retiring Senator Leaves Legacy of Protecting, Restoring Coast

INTRODUCTION:

A native of Glynn County, Sen. William Ligon, grew up amidst some of Georgia's most treasured natural wonders. Bordered on the north by the state's largest river—the Altamaha—and on the south by a blackwater beauty in the Little Satilla River, Glynn County sits squarely in the middle of Georgia's coast and is home to the state's fabled Golden Isles—St. Simons, Little St. Simons, Sea Island and Jekyll Island. It's not surprising then that Ligon grew up loving the outdoors, fishing the coast's blackwater streams and hunting the bottomland woods along those streams. And, it's equally unsurprising that when he was elected to serve in the Georgia Senate in 2010, he became a leading advocate for the preservation and restoration of coastal Georgia.



THE WATER BODY:

Georgia's coast stretches 100 miles, encompassing 14 major barrier islands, some 400,000 acres of tidal marshes and the estuaries of five major rivers: the Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha, Satilla and St. Marys. These coastal estuaries provide critically important habitat for seafood like shrimp, crabs and oysters, while the inland reaches of these waterways support countless industrial, agricultural and recreational uses. The natural beauty of the region makes it the state's most popular tourist destination, attracting some 15 million visitors annually. Meanwhile, the coast is visited by many other special creatures. Federally endangered right whales come to coastal waters to give birth to their young while several protected species of sea turtles nest on the state's beaches.

THE CLEAN:

Sen. William Ligon has learned in his ten years in the Georgia Senate that persistence pays off. In 2013, Ligon introduced a resolution urging the state to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study the closing of Noyes Cut near the mouth of the Satilla River. Noyes and other cuts, artificial openings along the intracoastal waterway engineered in the 1930s and 40s, had for years been disrupting salinity levels in the river's estuary. This, in turn, impacted the successful reproduction of crab, shrimp, oysters and several fish species, and also restricted boating access to several tidal creeks.

The timing of Ligon's resolution could have been better. With the state still reeling from recession, funds for studies that Ligon's resolution

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called for were in short supply, but through persistence, Ligon secured that funding. Four years later, the study recommended closing the manmade cuts to restore historic flow patterns—an action that is expected to also restore important fisheries.

Within the year, work should begin to close the cuts.

But Ligon's efforts on behalf of the coast don't end there. Concerned about the possibilities of toxic contaminants in coal ash leaching into underground water supplies, Ligon introduced SB 123 during the most recent legislative session. The bill, which passed with nearly unanimous support in both chambers, closes a loophole in Georgia's solid waste laws that encouraged out-of-state producers of coal ash to dump their waste in Georgia landfills.

Ligon was also a leading Senate proponent of HR 164, the "trust fund honesty" resolution. The resolution creates a constitutional amendment that, if approved by voters in November, will allow legislators to "dedicate" fees collected from citizens for specific purposes—like the state's Solid Waste and Hazardous Waste Trust Funds. It is the first step toward ensuring that fees collected to support the cleanup of illegal tire dumps and hazardous waste sites will be used for those purposes.

During his tenure, Ligon also worked to protect state-owned Jekyll Island from inappropriate development; advocated to prevent oil and gas drilling along the Georgia coast; and encouraged and secured funding for the development of the Coastal Georgia Greenway, a recreational path stretching from Savannah to St. Marys.

Even when his bills weren't adopted, Ligon's legislative efforts have raised the profile of issues impacting Georgia's coastal treasures. Such was the case this legislative session when, in response to a proposed landfill near his beloved Satilla River in Brantley County, he introduced legislation that would greatly restrict landfill development near blackwater rivers.

"They want to put a landfill in an area that is surrounded by wetlands," he said. "You don't put your trash can in the middle of your living room."

Though the legislation was not adopted, it did elevate the fight to stop the landfill—a fight that is still ongoing. "A bill may not pass, but it may have a positive impact," he said. "It can move the needle."

You can expect the retiring senator to continue pushing the needle from the private sector, and you'll also likely catch him more often on the Satilla, casting with his fly rod for redbreast and perch.

Top: On hand to celebrate Sen. Ligon's retirement from the Senate earlier this year were his parents, Pastor Bill and Dorothy Jean Ligon, shown here with their son and Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan. Above: In the 2020 legislative session, Sen. William Ligon introduced and successfully passed legislation that will help prevent out-of-state coal ash from being dumped in Georgia landfills.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

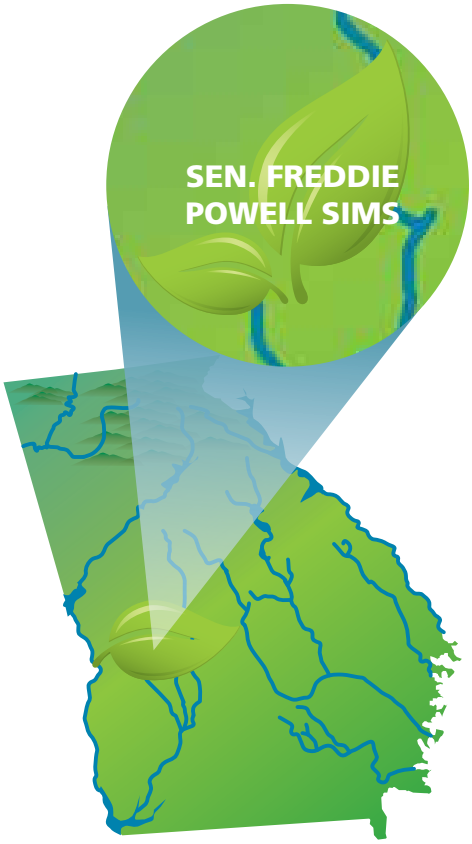
Sen. Freddie Powell Sims

GEORGIA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

Southwest Georgia Senator Fights for Farmers, Rural Landowners

INTRODUCTION:

Sen. Freddie Powell Sims lives two dirt roads from a paved road in rural Terrell County. Her district includes the city of Albany, but spans across 11 predominantly rural counties where agriculture is king. Though a long-time educator, her family roots run back to farming. She, and especially many of her constituents, know a bit about agriculture. So, when the Georgia Farm Bureau, Georgia Poultry Federation, Georgia Forestry Association and Georgia Agribusiness Council back a bill, Sen. Sims and other legislators representing rural Georgians, usually line up behind them. But the 2020 legislative session saw something most peculiar happen. This is the story of the deceptively titled "Right to Farm" bill, designed to welcome industrial scale-agriculture—and the foul, fly-attracting manure lagoons that go with it—to Georgia, and how it was defeated by unlikely advocates in Sen. Sims and her farmer constituents.



THE WATER BODY:

Industrial-scale agriculture where animals are confined and animal waste is concentrated poses serious risks to streams, rivers and lakes where ever they operate. Georgia's more than 70,000 miles of streams and rivers, 425,000 acres of lakes and vast stores of groundwater could all be threatened by such operations. In 1995, more than 10 million fish were killed in North Carolina's New River when a hog farm waste lagoon ruptured. A similar incident occurred in Georgia the same year, when a lagoon failure sent 12 million gallons of liquid manure into tributaries of the Oconee River. The streams and rivers that flow through Georgia's agriculture communities—and the groundwater that underlies those lands, not only irrigate those same farms and provide drinking water to countless communities, but are also part of the fabric of the state's rural culture serving as places where residents fish, hunt and recreate.

THE CLEAN:

"Initially all of us thought it was OK," said Sen. Freddie Powell Sims recounting her first impressions of HB 545, touted as the "Right To Farm" bill. "But if you dug deeper, you found out it did the total opposite. It takes away the right to defend the land we already own."

HB 545 sought to limit a landowner's legal recourse when a new agricultural operation moves into an area and begins fouling the air,

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water and quality of life. The bill was fashioned after a measure adopted by the pro-hog-farm North Carolina legislature after rural residents successfully sued a large-scale industrial farm for being a nuisance.

Environmental groups—led by the Georgia Water Coalition—and trial attorneys lined up against HB 545, but it passed the House. On the Senate side, however, things stalled, and as *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* political reporter Jim Galloway astutely noted at the time: "legislation (in Georgia)…doesn't usually stall because of opposition from environmentalists and trial lawyers," especially when the bill has the backing of the state's largest industry—agriculture.

It stalled because Sen. Sims began hearing from her constituents, fellow rural landowners and farmers themselves, many of them members of the same Georgia Farm Bureau backing the bill. HB 545 ultimately pitted farmers against farmers.

They stormed the capital, met with the Governor, Lt. Governor and most critically spoke before the 21-member Senate Democratic Caucus, urging them to read the bill's fine print and vote to keep industrial-scale farms from fouling rural communities.

"Once these farmers came to speak to the caucus, it was a done deal," said Sen. Sims. "They were passionate about the land." As the only rural senator in the Democratic Caucus, Sen. Sims urged her colleagues to oppose the bill. They did in unanimity. With several Republicans already opposed to the bill, its fate in the Senate was sealed.

The powerful agriculture lobby kept the pressure on, but Sims was unwavering. "They tried some ugly tactics," she said. "But I'm going to fight for what's right, and I think they'll respect that. If you can't take a stand on something, you might as well just stay home."

And, thus a coalition of farmers/landowners, environmentalists and trial lawyers—with a huge assist from a rural senator willing to take a stand—defeated a bad bill backed by some of the state's most powerful and influential sectors.

Sims attributes the victory to the involvement of her constituents: "It's (HB 545) no way to treat people that have been on their land for decades. This was a victory for those individuals who wanted nothing but to live without environmental destruction."

Top: Sen. Freddie Powell Sims speaks with Gov. Brian Kemp and others in Albany. Sen. Sims' was instrumental in defeating HB 545 during the most recent legislative session. The bill would have invited industrial-scale agriculture waste disposal to rural Georgia communities. Left: A graduate of Fort Valley State University, Sen. Freddie Powell Sims remains a supporter of the Wildcats. Sen. Sims represents the 12th District which includes Albany and 11 predominantly rural Southwest Georgia counties. Above: A resident of rural Terrell County, Sen. Sims helps deliver food to families suffering during the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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Georgia's 2020

CLEAN WATER HEROES

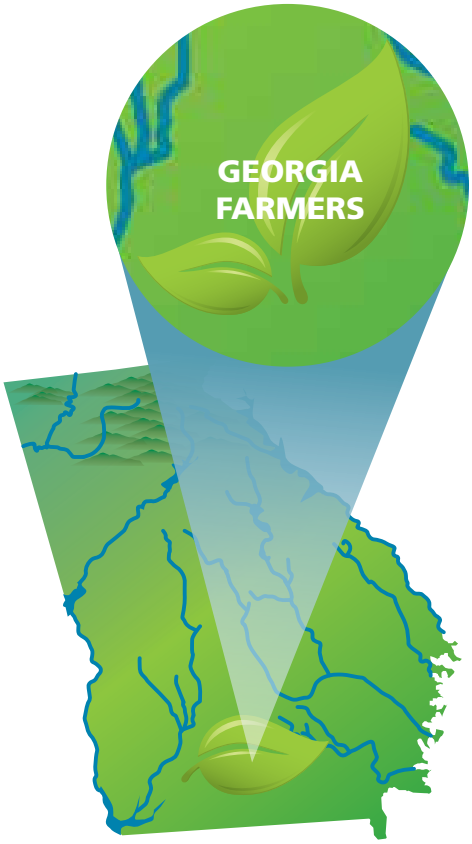
Georgia Farmers

GEORGIA'S WATER

Farmers Protect Rural Communities, Streams, Rivers, Property Rights

INTRODUCTION:

During the 2019 Georgia General Assembly session when HB 545, the so-called "Right to Farm" bill, was introduced, the Georgia Water Coalition (GWC) immediately identified it as a threat to Georgia's water. It was fashioned after legislation in North Carolina meant to protect industrial hog farms. When neighbors of these massive stench-filled farms won nuisance lawsuits, the pro-hog farm North Carolina legislature stepped into to prevent these lawsuits. HB 545, GWC member organizations argued, would invite to Georgia the kind of industrial-scale agriculture waste disposal that has decimated North Carolina communities. The battle over HB 545 spilled into the 2020 legislative session, where something unexpected happened. A surprising coalition of farmers bucked a bill supported by the state's most influential farm advocates in the Georgia Farm Bureau. That group of typically conservative-leaning farmers ultimately united with mostly urban Democratic state senators along with enough thoughtful Republicans to defeat HB 545. The effort was led by a passionate group from Southwest Georgia concerned about the fouling of rural communities by industrial animal waste lagoon operators. For them, the threat was not hypothetical; it was real.



THE WATER BODY:

Industrial-scale agriculture where animals are confined and animal waste is concentrated poses serious risks to streams, rivers and lakes where ever they operate. In 1995, more than 10 million fish were killed in North Carolina's New River when a hog farm waste lagoon ruptured. A similar incident occurred in Georgia the same year, when a lagoon failure sent 12 million gallons of liquid manure into tributaries of the Oconee River. The streams and rivers that flow through Georgia's agriculture communities—and the groundwater that underlies those lands, not only irrigate those same farms and provide drinking water to countless communities, but are also part of the fabric of the state's rural culture serving as places where residents fish, hunt and recreate.

THE CLEAN:

Over the last decade, farmers and property owners in Southwest Georgia have become increasingly aware of the perils of industrial animal agriculture as they struggled to deal with the impacts of such operations. So, when HB 545 cropped up in the Georgia General Assembly they immediately recognized it as a proposition that would strip rights from other rural landowners in similar situations.

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The measures included in the bill would greatly limit existing property owners' ability to file nuisance lawsuits against this type operation after it moves in to a rural community.

Countering the Georgia Farm Bureau and other agri-business lobbyists supporting the bill, a vocal group of Southwest Georgia farmers phoned and e-mailed legislators, contacted fellow farmers, took to social media, wrote letters to local newspapers and made multiple trips from Smithville, Sumter City, Albany and Leesburg to Atlanta to speak with legislators in person. A coalition of like-minded farmers from around the state soon joined in expressing their concerns.

At the invitation of Sen. Freddie Powell Sims (D-Dawson), Mark Israel, a self-described "hard, hard right" Republican and Sumter County farmer found himself in a most unlikely place—the Georgia Senate's Democratic Caucus, made up of Sen. Sims and 20 urban legislators.

"I'm not like anyone in this room," he told them. "We can choose one hundred subjects and we'd disagree on all of them, but we can agree on doing what's right."

Fellow Sumter County farmer Jenny Crisp echoed Israel's sentiments and told the caucus that HB 545 was "just big ag. trying to muscle their way into Georgia."

When the meeting was done, Sen. Sims, the lone senate Democrat representing a mostly rural district, secured the votes of the full caucus. With several key Republican senators already opposed, HB 545's fate was sealed.

Marjie McRee, another Sumter County farmer involved in the fight, called the victory a "major miracle," and said of the unlikely bipartisan coalition: "politics makes strange bedfellows."

Among the Georgia agricultural producers and landowners who took significant action against HB 545 were: Rusty Bell (Pierce County), Robert Clay (Lee County), Mary Linda Cotten (Dougherty County), Charles and Claire Cox (Dodge County), Mike Green (Monroe and Upson counties), Charles Israel (Sumter County), Hal Israel (Sumter County), William and Lewis Webb (Sumter County), Christopher Kalejta (Peach County), Sammy Lee (Macon and Schley counties), John Marbury (Lee County), Mark Royal (Schley County), Robin Singletary (Mitchell County), Charlotte Swancy (Gordon County), Linda Turpin (Dougherty County), Cindy and Michael Reddish (Tattnall County) and Claire Williams (Chatham County).

At a time when political and social divides seem deeper than ever, the defeat of HB 545 secured by this unlikely coalition serves as a reminder that protecting Georgia's water is common ground.

Top: The 2020 legislative session saw an unlikely bipartisan coalition of rural, conservative-leaning farmers and urban Democratic senators defeat HB 545, a bill backed by Georgia's most influential farm lobbyists. Marjie McRee, a Sumter County farmer, called the victory in the farmer versus farmer fight a "major miracle" and noted that "politics makes strange bedfellows." Above: Sunflowers brighten the landscape on the Cornwell and William Webb farm in Southwest Georgia. The Webbs were some of the dozens of agricultural producers from around the state that spoke out to defeat HB 545.

GEORGIA WATER COALITION

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