



2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

GEORGIA'S COAST

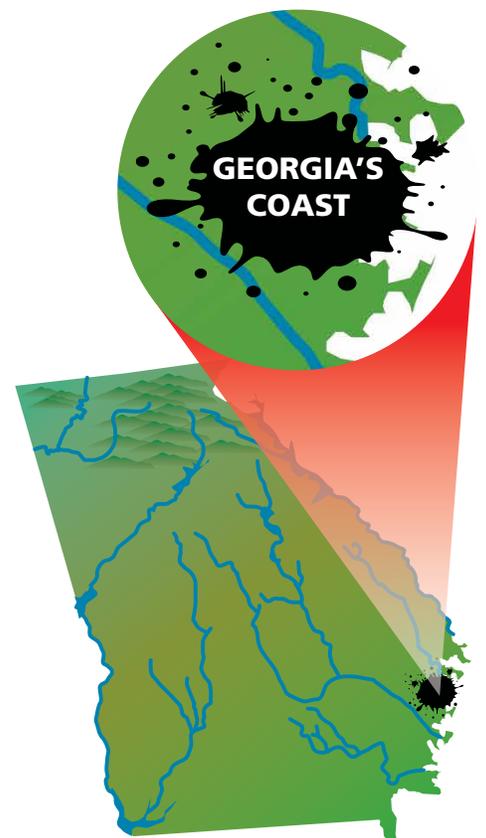
State Government Silent on Climate Change

INTRODUCTION:

Global climate change has steadily shown its impacts in Georgia. On the coast, sea levels have risen more than nine inches at Savannah's Fort Pulaski since 1935. Scientists expect coastal Georgia to experience at least six more inches of sea level rise within the next 50 years. Peach farmers have seen greater crop losses due to warmer winters and in many cases have shifted to more resilient varieties. Experts say that over the next 50 years, climate change will force Georgia farmers to grow different crops than what they grow today. In cities across the state, average temperatures have risen as have the number of heat wave days, creating a health threat especially for residents in substandard housing. Scientists predict that by 2050 Georgians will experience more than four times the number of heat wave days than they did at the turn of the century. Despite current conditions and dire warnings, Georgia elected officials have taken no comprehensive action to turn back global climate change or make the state's communities more resilient against this looming threat.

THE WATER BODY:

Climate change impacts all of Georgia's water bodies. On the Georgia coast where sea levels have already risen nearly a foot since the 1930s, scientists predict that within the next century, 420 square miles of the Georgia coast will be flooded by rising seas—a land mass equal to nearly four cities the size of Savannah. First to be impacted will be the coast's 400,000 acres of super productive salt marshes, which are critical to the health of Georgia's estuaries and commercial seafood industry. Scientists predict that sea level rise will cause the loss of between 14 and 34 percent of these marshes. Inland, climate change has already generated more extreme cycles of drought and flood on the state's rivers. Moving forward, experts predict more frequent damaging floods and worst droughts that will increase competition for water resources and harm aquatic wildlife, including 152 species that are at risk of population declines or outright extinction.





THE DIRT:

While local governments from Tybee Island to Athens and Savannah to Atlanta have taken action to address global climate change, at the state level, there's been mostly silence and inaction.



The state's efforts to confront the impacts of climate change have been restricted primarily to programs on the coast aimed at helping local communities plan for recovery and redevelopment following natural disasters. Meanwhile, the state efforts to promote clean energy projects have been tepid.

On the campaign trail in 2018, Gov. Brian Kemp's platform was notably void of any mention of climate change or clean energy. His actions in office have reflected that disinterest.

The inaction is particularly alarming given Georgia's vulnerability. In a recent study reviewing the health impacts of climate change conducted by the Trust for America's Public Health and John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Georgia ranked among the top ten most vulnerable and least prepared states in terms of dealing with the public health impacts of the climate crisis.

With some high-profile Republican leaders denying climate change exists, some observers place the blame for Georgia's climate inaction on party politics. But, a poll conducted by the Conservation Coalition in 2020 showed there may well be a disconnect between those leaders and Republican voters. The poll revealed that nationally 81 percent of voters considered climate change an important issue, including 68 percent of voters who identified as Republican. In Georgia, the same poll showed that 86 percent of voters, including 78 percent of Republican voters, believed the government should accelerate clean energy development.

Unlike other states, Georgia does not have a renewable energy portfolio standard, requiring public utilities to increase energy production from renewable sources. Nor does the state offer clean energy tax credits, solar power rebates, or sales tax or property tax exemptions to encourage residential clean energy projects.

Notably, for a time Georgia led the nation in the sale of zero-emission electric vehicles (EV), but when the legislature did away with a generous \$5000 tax credit, sales plummeted. An annual fee charged to EV drivers has further dampened enthusiasm for EVs, though Georgia still ranks among the top ten states in the number of electric vehicles on the road.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Georgia's governor and other state leaders must recognize the crucial role that state government has to play in the comprehensive effort necessary to address climate change. The state can look to the Drawdown Georgia Project for solutions that include a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions associated with residential, commercial, industrial and institutional buildings, transportation, water and wastewater management, solid waste management, and energy generation. They can use the influence of state government to both slow climate change and prepare Georgia for the potential impacts of climate change. Approving tax credits for clean energy is an easy place to start.

*Top: Sunny day flooding on Georgia's coast like this in Brunswick has become more regular due to an increased frequency of extreme high tides. In the absence of rain, flood waters now regularly inundate private property and prevent people from traveling to work, school, and home. Photo by Daniel Parshley
Above: To hold back incoming water, Jekyll and St. Simons Island have invested in shoreline hardening projects, like the one shown here. Officials on Tybee and Sea Island have invested in dune reconstruction and marsh restoration projects in efforts to build resiliency against rising seas. Photo by Megan Desrosiers*

For More Information Contact:

Megan Desrosiers, President/CEO, One Hundred Miles, 912-223-8608, megan@onehundredmiles.org

Chris Manganiello, Water Policy Director, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, 706-614-8698, cmanganiello@chattahoochee.org

