

# Economy, environment form a team

**Georgia is long overdue for an economic development strategy and budget that are reconciled with the state's environmental laws.**

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Gov. Sonny Perdue recently spoke about the importance of promoting tourism in Georgia, in part to compensate for the state's continued lackluster economic performance. Yet recent actions of Georgia officials are a direct threat to tourism as a strong and growing economic force.

By our reckoning, at least \$15 billion of the state's annual tourism activity is directly attributable to healthy natural resources — especially water quality and fisheries, which here on the coast contribute some \$1 billion in tourism and outdoor recreation business revenues every year. Some 40,000 coastal jobs and as many as 600,000 jobs in Georgia depend directly on a well-protected environment. Even minor harm to natural resources could cause millions of lost annual revenues in nature-based business, severely curtailing Georgia's potential for further tourism diversification.

In light of the governor's public commitment to boosting Georgia's tourism efforts and overwhelming evidence of that sector's growth potential, it is especially ironic that those charged with protecting the state's natural resources have adopted an exemption that would abolish certain water quality safeguards.

By taking away buffers for streams that only flow during rainstorms, the Board of Natural Resources is exposing state waters to more threats from "non-point" source pollution, blatantly at odds with Georgia's tourism interests.

Most non-point source pollution is generated by storm-water runoff, where rains carry petrochemicals from roads and parking lots, fertilizers and pesticides from farms and suburban lots, and all sorts of industrial and agricultural contaminants to public waterways.

No matter how seldom a small stream or ditch may transport water, without natural buffers it is likely to convey contaminants, which can add substantially to the non-point source pollution of state waters — already a well-documented and serious water quality problem throughout Georgia.

Exposing hundreds if not thousands of such streams to these risks by adopting the buffer exemption unjustifiably jeopardizes Georgia's water quality and long-term economic interests through further impairment.

This unwise exemption adds more problems to a program already plagued by poor performance.

By various estimates, the Environmental Protection Division is underfunded by 60-80 percent of what is needed to properly enforce existing point-source permitting regulations. State erosion and sedimentation regulations are also known for having chronic enforcement deficiencies, due at least in part to major funding and staffing shortages. Local governments share in this default of public water protection responsibilities by often failing to adequately monitor and enforce erosion controls in land use decisions.

Georgia is long overdue for an economic development strategy and budget that are reconciled with the state's environmental laws. Given the short-term, fragmented thinking that dominates most decisions affecting the condition of Georgia's public trust resources such as air, water, habitat and wildlife, this is a formidable challenge.

We urge Perdue to use his considerable authority to recognize the vital functions of the natural environment when promoting the state's economic development. This objective should be at the very heart of the governor's efforts to achieve greater fiscal responsibility, because our natural resources are among Georgia's most valued forms of wealth — and essential to the shared future prosperity of all our citizens.

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