



Below is a summary of some key issues that we'll be tackling in 2015 to protect coastal Georgia. Please do your part to assist in our efforts by making a tax-deductible donation to the Center.

Half the Center's budget depends on support from thoughtful people who help us safeguard the future of Georgia's coast.



1. Marsh Buffers

The status of Georgia's 25-foot marsh-buffer remains uncertain. In spite of a favorable appeals-court ruling in July that upheld the buffer, the EPD director has filed legal action to reverse that decision by taking the case to the state supreme court. He's also issued a memo to the EPD field offices saying that they should ignore the appeals-court ruling – which means they are directed to

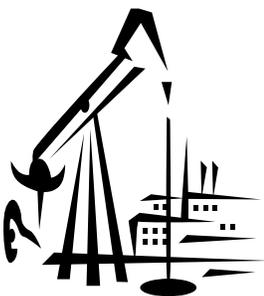
continue as if there is no tidal-marsh buffer and no buffer on other (freshwater) wetlands further inland. Such direct defiance of a legal ruling is unprecedented, and it's made all the more remarkable because it weakens Georgia's environmental protection. It is expected that legislation to restore the marsh buffer will be introduced in the General Assembly, but the outcome remains uncertain, and freshwater wetlands may remain unprotected. We have created an online petition on this issue – **please sign on at <http://petitions.moveon.org/sign/restore-georgias-marsh>**.



2. Offshore Drilling

Within a year, the federal government will decide if and where to invite bids for offshore leasing so that oil companies can explore for and, if deemed feasible, drill for oil deep beneath the floor of the Outer Continental Shelf. All coastal regions of the nation are under consideration, including the South Atlantic. If allowed, not only would these activities impose a high risk of damaging marine

and on-shore areas by spilling oil, but exploration methods using seismic air-guns are known to cause serious harm to marine mammals, including death to many threatened and endangered species. Airguns are so intensely loud that they disturb, injure or kill marine life, harm commercial fisheries, and disrupt coastal economies. These dynamite-like blasts – repeated every ten seconds, 24 hours a day, for days and weeks at a time—are thousands of times more intense than a jet engine. According to government estimates, the seismic airgun testing proposed in the Atlantic will injure or kill 138,500 whales, sea turtles and dolphins and disturb millions more. Moreover, burning any fossil fuels found would emit greenhouse gases, further worsening climate-change damage to ecosystems and coastlines. Among these impacts is sea level rise, which will hit coastal areas with flooding, storm-surge damage, and severe erosion. These are direct threats to our environmental quality, coastal homes and businesses worth many billions of dollars, and coastal Georgia's prized eco-tourism sector, which generates \$2 billion and year and supports thousands of local jobs.



3. Aquifer Storage & Recovery

A legislative committee of the Georgia General Assembly is investigating the use of "Aquifer Storage and Recovery" (ASR) – a precarious method for storing surface water beneath the ground that could contaminate groundwater sources of drinking water. Groundwater at risk includes the Floridan aquifer, which is the main, pristine water supply for all of Georgia's coastal plain – about 1.5 million people. As the Center and other groups have advised legislators who are studying ASR, there are far less risky and more prudent, effective options for improving water availability in Georgia.

Foremost is requiring power-producers, the biggest water users in the state, to conserve some of the hundreds of millions of gallons a day that is evaporated by cooling thermo-electric power plants. Georgia has a water-conservation law but it completely exempts the power industry even though it is the biggest water user. Experts estimate that water wasted through evaporation could be reduced by some 70% if hybrid air-and-water cooling was used. The cost of such efficiency upgrades would be trivial compared with total operating costs over a plant's lifespan. Another important benefit of reducing water needed for cooling power-plants is avoiding costly brown-outs and power-plant shutdowns caused by river-flow shortages during prolonged droughts – which are predicted to increase in Georgia (and elsewhere) as a consequence of climate change.



4. Plant Vogtle Expansion

Georgia's Public Service Commission (PSC) approved a request by Southern Company to use the 9% surcharge being added to the monthly bills of residential power customers to help pay for the enormous cost overruns in expanding Plant Vogtle. This project, if and when completed, will double the 2 nuclear reactors at the site to 4. So far, the plant expansion is more than a billion dollars over budget, not including exorbitant legal fees being incurred in disputes between SoCo and the producers of the Westinghouse equipment. The surcharge was established in 2009 by the Georgia General Assembly, setting a new precedent by requiring customers to pay in advance for a product/service they may never receive. In a recent move, the PSC has approved using that customer surcharge to pay for overruns – even though SoCo assured the PSC that their estimate of \$14 billion for the expansion was firm at the time the PSC approved the project. Postscript: at the same meeting, the PSC defeated a proposal to require SoCo to make investments in hybrid cooling as a water-conservation measure. As a result, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) recently approved a Vogtle permit to withdraw 74 million gallons of water a day from the already over-stressed Savannah River. About 40 million gallons will be vaporized in cooling the added reactors at the Vogtle plant, assuming they are ever completed.



5. Climate Change & Clean Energy

Climate-change neglect will rapidly escalate future costs, with increasingly dire outcomes. Converting to clean and renewable energy sources such as wind and solar is vital to reducing the serious threats imposed by climate change. Such threats include crop losses, wildfire, debilitating disease, premature deaths, and rampant species extinctions, as well as sea-level rise and ocean acidification. Georgia is taking modest steps to expand the use of solar power, but a major obstacle remains entrenched in existing state law: there is a current prohibition that prevents 'third parties' from leasing solar photo-voltaic equipment to private homeowners, most of whom cannot afford to finance the purchase of solar units. If this prohibition protecting power companies and their stockholders were eliminated, the market for solar-based electricity generation would skyrocket. Meanwhile, not only do Georgia elected officials defend this direct interference in the emerging market for clean power, but they subsidize polluting and water-squandering power industries with provisions such as the consumer surcharge, unrestricted use of public water, and bailouts for cost-overruns.

Related to this critical issue is the pending approval of the reactivation of a facility for liquefied natural gas (LNG) at Elba Island near Savannah, adjacent to the main channel for the Savannah port. Not only does the risk of a catastrophic accident endanger thousands of families and vast areas of tidal marsh, but the facility will help promote energy policies that will worsen climate change and sea-level rise. Recent research into the rampant use of "fracking" methods to extract natural gas reveals that the excessive leakage of methane – a greenhouse gas that, per ton, is 30 times more heat-trapping than CO₂ – will negate any benefit of burning natural gas instead of other fossil fuels. Thus, by approving the Elba Island facility and exporting LNG worldwide, Georgia will be compounding climate-change problems, in a way similar to the controversial Keystone Pipeline. We strongly recommend opposing the Elba Island facility because it endangers coastal Georgians and will accelerate sea-level rise and intensify other destructive impacts caused by climate change.

Conclusion

Given all of the above, it is clear that coastal Georgia is facing profound threats to both our environment and quality of life – not only because of larger issues such as global climate disruption and world energy markets, but also due to woefully irresponsible decisions being made by Georgia's public officials (elected and appointed) who often ignore the public interest. Such decisions reflect a culture of failed leadership, dominated by outdated and irresponsible views on the meaning of progress, largely driven by politically manipulated motives that too frequently serve special-interests at the public's expense.

Our efforts must be focused on raising awareness about these issues and strengthening the understanding and defense of public interest by building support for better decisions and more accountable decision-makers. We encourage you to follow the Center's website and Facebook page to stay updated on important actions that you can take to assist on these issues. You are also encouraged to become a Center member, which enhances access to timely information about coastal protection.