

The State of Georgia's Coast: 2009 Update

Executive Summary

This is the first update since the release of our *State of Georgia's Coast Report* in 2004. Although the region's general trends and conditions remain largely the same, the implications are more threatening because prior problems remain either unrecognized, unsolved, or made worse by regressive actions of state or local governments.

A prime example is under consideration in the Georgia General Assembly as this summary is written (late March 2009). Driven by the misinformed notion that development interests should take priority over protecting waterways and wetlands, a bill pending in the final days of the legislative session would remove buffers from small streams. These streams are tributaries to Georgia's rivers, including the five major river systems that flow to the coast. Removing buffers along them will unquestionably increase pollution of state waters. When trout stream buffers were cut in half six years ago, UGA researchers concluded that the trout population plummeted by more than three quarters. And it is well-established that Georgia's water quality is threatened most by rainwater carrying pollutants from land-based activities into state waterways and wetlands. Natural buffers are the least expensive and most effective way to protect water quality.

In the same session, Georgia legislators failed to take action on a proposal to conduct a climate action study, an important step toward getting control of activities contributing to global climate change. At a time when the vast majority of scientists and the general population agree that worldwide warming trends are being significantly aggravated by human activities, **Georgia remains the only state on the eastern seaboard that has failed to adopt or develop measures to address the climate change issue.**

The coastal region has the most at risk from the stubborn defiance of our elected officials on this issue. In addition to rising sea level, which will definitely increase the flooding (if not inundation) of coastal property in the years ahead, the intensity and frequency of major storms can be expected, and further harm to marine resources will occur. These adverse impacts on coastal areas must be addressed at all levels, including actions by the state that can help protect resources and citizens by improving energy efficiency in buildings and vehicles, controlling sprawl, and keeping new development out of harm's way.

In virtually every realm of assessment, the sustainability of Georgia's coast (and of Georgia's prospects as a state) is impeded by irresponsible actions of public officials, both elected and appointed. Based on years of observation,

it is clear that the state's leadership has become more entrenched than ever in the foolhardy belief that short-term profit-making is more important than attention to long-term public interests.

As a result, the state's real prospects – both economic and quality-of-life factors – suffer. While Georgia officials tout the importance of the state's natural resources, including the economic value of recreational fishing, they continue to weaken and dismantle the very environmental controls that protect those resources. Similarly, officials cynically under-budget and reallocate state funds away from the management of public resources and the control of development. They rationalize this with unsubstantiated claims to be helping property owners and businesses, thus aiding the financial prospects of Georgia's citizens. Yet the actual impacts of such decisions often have the opposite effect.

Tens of billions of dollars of annual business revenue in Georgia is derived from existing natural resources. And the value of property in many places that Georgians cherish most rests largely on the quality of natural surroundings, worth hundreds of billions more. **If elected officials and appointees persist in viewing regulation as an impediment to profiting from development, our prized places and the resources they depend upon will continue to decline.**

Yet the undermining and fragmentation of state authority used to safeguard environmental resources continues. Energy producers that use the most water from our rivers are awarded political favors while the state struggles with water management problems and legislators underfund water planning. Land developers are held to nominal standards of regulation by both local and state officials, and as population grows, state financial support of resource monitoring and protection diminishes. Instead of giving environmental permits more thorough review and requiring permit applicants to provide more information to use in evaluating impacts, state officials under-staff enforcement and demand expedited review at the behest of developers.

These trends and practices do not bode well for coastal Georgia, and they now appear to be worsening. Due to the national economic crisis, despite federal remedies being offered to states, Georgia officials are reacting to the situation by becoming even more fixated on promoting profit-making activities of any kind, regardless of the long-term implications. And they are increasingly reluctant to recognize the importance of regulating the private sector, despite the profound damage done by Wall Street when unleashed.

Rather than addressing the symptoms of fundamental problems with a counterproductive patchwork of ineffectual actions, state officials need to be treating the underlying diseases with systemic remedies. Instead of trying to reconcile water supply problems, declining water quality, wasteful and polluting power production and land development, contaminated fish, and coastal flooding as if they are independent and inevitable occurrences, policy makers must make rational choices based on the well-documented inter-relationships among these issues.

Study of the interconnections between development, environment, and the economy leads to a set of principles that forms the only path toward a successful future. Current practices are nowhere near that path and by all indications seem to be headed further away from it. If blind allegiance to boundless profiteering in the private sector and tax-minimization in the public sector remain the dominant motives of those shaping state policy, Georgia will be left behind as other states advance. Surely this is not in the public interest.

By aggressively implementing **growth management** (paying for development as it occurs, accurately monitoring its impacts, and making timely corrections as needed), **clean and renewable energy**, and a pattern of **land use that conforms to the capacity of natural systems** upon which we all depend, Georgia can realize the benefits of economic development while maintaining a healthy environment. Doing this will require a major shift in the practices of state agencies, not the least of which includes a more integrative, adaptive, and self-regulating approach to the formulation and administration of public policies.

The longer state and local officials seek to maintain a fragmented, exploitative, and incremental approach to the use of public resources, true resource management cannot be attained and sustainability will become more elusive. Successful conversion to a systemic approach to public policy is not simple and it cannot be done on the cheap. The illusion that minimizing the scale of government will maximize the realization of public interest must be abandoned for the self-deceiving fantasy that it is.

Already coastal Georgians suffer the consequences of that delusion, combined with the equally wrong-headed idea that speculation is good because it is (or at least *was*) profitable. Prior to the 2008 credit crisis, thousands of acres of coastal landscape were cleared annually to prepare for development on a massive scale that was utterly unjustified on the basis of documented population growth. Some 165,000 housing units have been proposed in the ten largest

projects proposed between 2005 and 2008. That amount of housing could shelter population levels that will take at least 25 years of coastal growth to accumulate at current rates. And, of course, there is – and will be – much more development proposed beyond these ten largest projects. (See appendix for more data documenting development proposals.)

As both tax-payers and consumers, Georgians continue to be subsidizing the profits of a few, willingly assisted by the actions of state legislators and local elected officials. On the coast this exploitation takes form in local infrastructure that benefits speculative developers while being paid for by existing water and sewer customers. Capacity added makes building lots more alluring to individuals who seek to turn quick profits by ‘flipping’ them to still other buyers. This capability has stimulated the already overheated land speculation game that’s done so much avoidable damage to our natural resources and economy.

Another example is the recent legislative priority given to a rate increase imposed on Georgia Power customers to pay for an expansion of nuclear power that won’t even be operational until at least five years after the rate hike takes effect. (Given the history of nuclear facilities, the delay is likely to be closer to ten years.) And no matter when the expansion occurs and whatever it costs, stockholders will be guaranteed profits paid for by customers, according to the arrangements adopted by state officials. Meanwhile, the conversion to cleaner and cheaper offshore wind for electrical generation may be stymied because the foreseeable energy market seems to be captured by the legislature’s unwarranted commitment to expanding the Vogtle nuclear power plant. Moreover, the plant’s expansion along the Savannah River will remove around 40 million gallons a day from the river, further threatening water supplies and river ecology already compromised by drought and wasteful but officially approved practices.

Most sobering of all, especially on the coast, and in defiance of the reasoning of all neighboring states on the Atlantic seaboard, is that Georgia officials evidently refuse to take steps to address climate change. This choice is yet another decision that marks the notable tendency of leading state officials to exercise a dangerous combination of dogmatic ignorance and limited vision. Lacking an ability to accurately perceive public interest and/or a willingness to give it the highest priority, misguided leadership cannot produce results so desperately needed by coastal citizens.

If Georgia’s coast is to be properly guided in the dynamic times ahead, new standards of performance will be needed.

To ensure these are effective, the public must be committed to holding officials accountable to clearly defined goals and well-understood practices.

One essential step toward that accountability is the adoption and use of specific indicators that are devised to measure the relative health, adaptability, and responsiveness of state resources and the programs that govern them. Having these in place would help guide the creation and refinement of state policies as well as evaluating their implementation and effectiveness.

Two years ago the Center recommended sixteen such indicators (please refer to the appendix). Although the resources available for this report do not support the thorough evaluation of coastal trends and conditions by the standards of those indicators, it is clear that the current course of change in coastal Georgia does not substantiate reason to believe that public policies favor improved regional sustainability.

While tentative steps have been taken to address some problems, such as advancing a 'coastal supplement' to the state stormwater control manual, these have yet to be adopted by local governments, and it is by no means clear that these measures will be put into practice by many of them. And the slow progress in implementing the coastal comprehensive plan suggest possible improvement in the coordination and control of coastal development, but it is much too soon to determine if the plan's objectives will be achieved to any significant extent.

Compared with the fundamental problems outlined in this report, these steps are small indeed, and not nearly enough to compensate for adverse trends. Foremost among these troublesome trends, and the basis for many problems, is the political climate. Thus, to achieve any significant advancement toward sustainability, improvements in the administration of government (governance) must be given high priority. The only way to achieve results needed in a timely manner is to harness the power of private markets and public opinion. Both these depend on providing better information that explains to the public why issues are relevant and what should be done about them.

At the top of the list of what the public needs to know is the supreme value of having a healthy environment. Services like water storage and filtration, flood protection, and wildlife habitat are essential to property value, public health, and thriving recreation and tourism sectors. These are worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year just on Georgia's coast. (Tidal marshes alone provide an estimated \$5.6 billion

annually in productivity and land protection.) Yet, officials in charge of public policy put these environmental services at risk by being preoccupied with promoting growth and short-term profits that are derived from it. Many of these profits are illusory and they serve the public interest far less than the natural resources that are degraded when projects are pursued without adequate regulation.

Thus, the second message the public needs to understand is that **financial accountability is essential, and it is often misrepresented or misunderstood by public officials and public institutions.** At the heart of the public's frustration with government is the failure of public officials to make wise choices that are motivated by informed understanding of public interest. The corrupted official who manipulates his influence to pocket personal gains or win political favors may be no more destructive than a well-meaning one who fails to understand the relationships between the environment, the economy, and quality of life. Either way, the public loses and taxes revenues are squandered.

The only way to overcome these well-entrenched problems, making government more effective, is to adopt clear measures of public good and to hold officials accountable to them.

In the aftermath of the national failure of financial institutions, triggered by poorly regulated market maneuvering, the time is ripe for reforms in the accountability of both regulators and the regulated. Federal efforts to bring economic recovery are tied to important requirements to provide credible documentation about the purpose and effect of funds being offered. This new level of accountability is being imposed on state and local government agencies, just as it is being required of all other eligible funding recipients.

Using this opportunity as a springboard, non-profit groups and others concerned with protecting the public interest must persistently push for similar reforms across the board in local and state government. **Citizens must insist on knowing who pays and who benefits when public funds or public resources are proposed to be used, and they must demand reliable means for determining actual results after any proposal is adopted.** The public can no longer tolerate vague assumptions or dubious claims about the benefit of an activity to be permitted, a program to be funded, or a budget cut without having accurate information that substantiates the outcome of such decisions. This is the essence of accountability, which is vital to the coast's future.

Recommendations

1. Climate Change

Due to the critical importance of climate change, several actions deserve the most urgent priority to protect coastal interests.

a. Mobilize public support and promote investor interest in developing offshore wind energy along Georgia's coast. This includes working closely with federal officials who are responsible for cultivating renewable energy and regulating its use.

b. Launch an aggressive public information campaign about the risks of building in areas exposed to flooding, storm surge, and rising sea level. As forecasts of sea level rise are updated, release mapping and other information describing the areas at greatest risk.

c. Seek federal and foundation technical and financial support for developing an aggressive, comprehensive energy conservation program. Central to this effort is public information about the importance of conserving energy and its significant economic benefits. This must include improvement in the design, production, and access to new products (including shelter) as well as retrofitting and adapting existing ones.

d. Set state targets for two critical objectives: reduction of carbon dioxide emissions and conversion to renewable energy sources. (Suggested goals: 20% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions and 30% renewable energy production by 2025.)

2. Accountability of government agencies

Reliable decisions that support public interest can only be ensured with greater clarity, transparency, and accountability required by law.

a. If any individual business or sectors of business receives financial support from the actions of state authorities (directly or indirectly), detailed financial records of the operations receiving such benefits must be released to the public.

b. Key decisions by state and local officials (elected and appointed) must be monitored to determine their impacts and the distribution of such impacts on members of the public. As appropriate, the expense of this monitoring should be shared with private parties who benefit from the decision in question. If monitoring reveals adverse impacts on public resources, every possible step must be taken to prevent further damage and to restore the prior condition of affected resources.

c. Budgeting decisions must be supported by more complete analysis of the value of (and need for) public

programs affected. For example, the public benefit provided by the protection of water resources and wildlife habitat must be considered, as well as analysis of the most recent trends in the conditions of such resources.

d. A system of annual performance reporting should be adopted throughout all levels of government. Performance measures must capture substantive evidence of the results achieved and accurate description of beneficiaries. All such reports must be released for public review when they are completed.

3. Land Development & Resource Protection

The proven methods available to make better decisions about site selection and site design must be put into practice as much as possible and as soon as possible. These methods will greatly reduce the environmental harm done by continuing coastal growth.

a. Provide well-audited funding and technical assistance to local governments for their implementation of stormwater controls, emphasizing the use of green infrastructure to the maximum extent feasible. This assistance should be augmented by development fees paid into a dedicated fund established for that purpose.

b. All proposed development must include analysis of soils. Hydric soils must be clearly identified and prohibited from being disturbed or developed. Sites with large amounts of hydric soils will be infeasible to develop and should be held for passive use or conservation.

c. Wastewater reuse standards must be revised to prevent the release of partially treated water in land application or direct discharge into waters of the state. Legitimate wastewater reuse systems should be promoted but they should be required to be carefully monitored and routine reports of results should be filed as public records.

d. Patterns of land use should be controlled to reduce sprawl, but that goal must not be used to permit the use of unsuitable building sites. State and local governments must adopt rigorous standards for the location, timing, and financing of infrastructure to support more responsible land development and to prevent unfair subsidy of new development by existing taxpayers.

e. Private development of public lands must be closely monitored. State agencies that propose to lease or sell public land for private use must first submit such proposals for review by professionals in the field of public land planning, recreation, and natural resource management as means of ensuring that the public interest is not sacrificed to private gain.