

# GEORGIA'S RIVER CARE 2000 PROGRAM

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**Abstract.** Georgia's 70,000 miles of rivers and streams face many challenges from the changes in land use which the state's rapid growth is bringing. In response, Governor Zell Miller in 1995 established the RiverCare 2000 Program, which is designed to improve the knowledge and management of Georgia's rivers. The program has three elements: an assessment of rivers, an evaluation of the current regulatory and non-regulatory tools for managing rivers, and a program of land acquisition which is currently funded at \$15.6 million. Four groups of citizen-advisors, totaling more than 100 people, are developing the program, which is being implemented by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

## INTRODUCTION

Georgia has more than 70,000 miles of rivers. Most of them originate within the state, so Georgia has a unique opportunity to determine the future of its own rivers, from their headwaters all the way downstream.

Georgians are fortunate to have a good supply of clean water. Programs implemented by federal, state and local governments, industry, farmers, foresters and other individuals have greatly helped to improve water quality in our rivers over the past twenty years.

However, our rivers still face significant challenges. It is hard to control storm-water runoff, which carries many chemicals from urban and agricultural lands into rivers. When landowners disturb the soil without effectively controlling soil movement, erosion and subsequent sedimentation may harm water quality and wildlife species which depend on clean rivers. Altering rivers and their associated wetlands and upland habitats reduces populations of many native wildlife species. Development destroys historic resources which reflect human use of rivers from earliest times. Some riverfront landowners want to restrict public recreational use of rivers. Unwise development of flood-prone areas has cost Georgia far too many lives and millions of dollars in property damage.

RiverCare 2000 is a conservation program which Governor Zell Miller established in September 1995, to meet some of these challenges by improving our knowledge and management of the state's rivers. The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) administers the program, with guidance from four citizens'

advisory groups. Between now and the year 2000, RiverCare 2000 will include three related tasks: assessing important river resources throughout the state, identifying more effective management tools for river corridors, and acquiring riverfront lands for the program. These tasks are described in the following paragraphs.

## CITIZENS' ADVISORY GROUPS

Governor Miller has named an eleven-person RiverCare 2000 Coordinating Committee and its chairperson, to give policy-level guidance to the program. DNR has named three additional citizens' groups to make recommendations to the Coordinating Committee in three areas. The River Assessment Team will guide the evaluation of river resources and challenges, and to recommend river segments which should be managed more effectively by public or private owners. The Tools-for-Management Team will evaluate ways of managing river corridors and to recommend improved management methods. The Acquisition Criteria Team has established specific purposes for state, local and private conservation acquisition and to identify desirable kinds of lands to protect.

### River Assessment

Several southeastern states have assessed their existing river resources and the challenges to those resources. Kentucky, Florida and South Carolina have completed their assessments. Tennessee's is nearly finished, and North Carolina has begun a high-priority effort.

Georgia has begun a river evaluation and expects to publish a final report by July 1997. The National Park Service is providing technical assistance to help DNR manage the evaluation effort. Representatives from river-resource interest groups are involved as advisors on the river-assessment team and in technical-expert work groups.

The team is assembling existing information about significant river segments in an easy-to-understand format. The assessment report will identify the highest-quality segments of rivers in Georgia from the point of view of 13 important values: agriculture, botanical resources, cultural (historic) resources, economic resources, educational resources, fisheries resources, forest resources, geological resources, recreation, scenic

character, water quality, water resources (supply), and wildlife resources. The individual work groups have developed criteria for the assessment, have identified and collected data, and have assigned river segments to standard categories of Superior, Outstanding, and Significant. They are completing their reports of findings, which they will present to the Coordinating Committee for its approval in June 1997. The report will include maps and tables prepared using geographic information systems, which will facilitate storage, use, and updating of the information which has been gathered for the assessment.

The assessment report will be an informational document, not a plan or policy statement. Other states have found that these reports are useful to everyone who has a stake in river use, including landowners, governmental officials, private developers, conservationists, and outdoor recreationists.

In 1992, the General Assembly enacted a law (*O.C.G.A.* 12-5-520) which established a river-basin management planning approach to watershed protection. This law designated the Chattahoochee, Flint, Coosa, and Oconee river basins as the first to be addressed. DNR's Environmental Protection Division has begun collecting data in these four watersheds. The work products of the river-basin management planning effort will support the statewide river evaluation. In addition, DNR will use information about river corridors which was developed under previous programs to support decisions about the RiverCare 2000 Program's corridor-management priorities.

#### **Evaluation of Management Tools**

The citizens who serve on the tools-for-management team are helping DNR identify high-priority river-protection issues and practical tools for addressing them. The team is determining how federal, state and local laws and programs affect rivers and will soon begin to determine how these management tools can be improved. Existing state laws which affect rivers in important ways include the Georgia Scenic Rivers Act, the Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control Act, the Metropolitan River Protection Act, the River Basin Planning Act, and the Georgia Planning Act.

The team will analyze the assessment findings, to determine where existing protection and management tools do not adequately address challenges to river quality. Among other things, this analysis will help the state focus its acquisition efforts in those areas where it can most effectively meet RiverCare's objectives for river protection. After it analyzes existing protection and management tools, DNR will revise its objectives for river protection and evaluate new management strategies. RiverCare will emphasize cooperation and incentives, wherever possible. DNR will not propose any action which would result in taking landowners' property rights without compensation.

During the past 20 years, the state has used a command-and-control regulatory approach to address point-source pollution problems. Although this has been quite successful, the regulatory approach may not work as well with today's challenges, which include more broad-scale, diffuse impacts associated with development in watersheds. Many of the challenges facing rivers today are related to Georgians' lifestyles. They are the cumulative result of the management decisions of individual landowners. In

many cases, local citizens and local governments will have to champion river protection in the future. RiverCare will help develop active partnerships to encourage river protection by local landowners, organizations and governmental bodies.

Improved coordination between the state and local governments will help protect river corridors and water quality. DNR may also explore the usefulness of other protection tools, such as conservation covenants. These are non-binding, voluntary agreements among groups of landowners to do various things with their land—for example, to leave in place all vegetation within 100 feet of a stream bank. Other strategies may include incentive-based programs to encourage the protection of river corridors by the landowners.

Educating landowners and local officials about the importance of river corridors will also be important. DNR will work with the Georgia Farm Bureau and other organizations to communicate the economic and social values which river corridors possess. The educational program will emphasize the need to manage these areas wisely.

## **PROJECTS**

### **Acquisition of River-corridor Lands**

RiverCare 2000 has obtained \$15.6 million in acquisition funds and has begun negotiations to acquire suitable river-related lands. The program is based on a willing-buyer, willing-seller concept, so riverfront landowners need not feel threatened by state acquisition. DNR is exploring ways of offsetting the community's loss of ad-valorem tax revenues which occurs when the state acquires real property. The Coordinating Committee has approved procedures for selecting riverfront lands to acquire. There are three kinds of projects.

### **Riverway Demonstration Projects**

A riverway demonstration project improves public access to a river and protects natural and historic resources by acquiring and managing land in the river corridor. The corridor must be scenic and suitable for family recreation. A project will extend along a stretch of river corridor, perhaps ten or more miles. It should attract visitors from beyond the neighboring communities.

Significantly, this kind of project is not initiated by the state, but rather by the community, with local governments, citizens, landowners, organizations, and federal agencies (where applicable) joining together to identify an initial vision for the river. These agencies and private interests then ask the state to become a partner for funding.

If DNR approves the funding, it will acquire only that land which is necessary for the project to succeed. To leverage the state monies, the other partners will be asked to contribute lands already in public ownership, funds for development, staff time for operations and maintenance, and other resources, such as volunteered time.

State acquisition monies are too limited to fund a project in every eligible community. The state will select five to ten projects for significant funding before the end of Governor Miller's administration. As of February 1997, ten communities had

requested that DNR consider participating in a local riverway demonstration project. These proposals are under review.

### **Significant Sites**

A significant site is a tract of land which DNR will acquire and operate as a traditional state public-use facility: wildlife management or public fishing area, park or historic site, natural area, or greenway. Some acquisitions will expand existing facilities; other acquisitions will create new ones. A significant site may eventually be managed as part of a riverway demonstration project, or independently if it lies outside a project boundary.

### **Restoration Sites**

A restoration site is a tract of land which the state will identify, acquire and manage to reduce nonpoint-source water pollution. Like a significant site, it may be managed independently.

### **Conservation Easements**

DNR will also acquire conservation easements, where appropriate. In general, DNR will consider a conservation easement only if its terms are adequate to achieve the state's conservation objectives, and it comes as a gift. If DNR chooses not to accept a particular offer, it will notify local government or private conservation organizations of the opportunity to acquire the easement.

### **Partnerships with the Private Sector**

DNR will work with the private sector to acquire and protect river corridor property. The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, The Trust for Public Land and The Archaeological Conservancy are the major private, nationwide, non-profit firms in Georgia which acquire land for conservation purposes. They will be asked to negotiate, on DNR's behalf, important tracts on rivers where they have expertise. DNR will also directly negotiate and acquire corridor projects.

DNR will cooperate with private land trusts, local units of government, and state and federal agencies to help protect river corridors. For example, DNR will give higher priority to state acquisition projects in river segments where local agencies and organizations are actively protecting river corridor lands through land-use regulation or acquisition. DNR may purchase some river corridor properties and lease them to local governments or land trusts, if doing so will leverage considerable non-state investment for the project, or if it is necessary to make possible a local project which has regional or statewide significance. DNR may also contract with local governments to acquire lands on the state's behalf.

### **Effects of Land Acquisition**

Land acquisition could protect about 75 miles of river corridor each year, depending on the price of land and the willingness of owners to convey their property to the state. Other protection tools and strategies will be needed to effect long-term protection of Georgia's rivers

## **FUNDING AVAILABILITY AND NEEDS**

RiverCare 2000 acquisition funds currently in hand include \$13.5 million in state bond monies, \$1.1 million in federal matching funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and \$1 million in private gifts. Governor Miller has requested that the General Assembly provide an additional \$10 million in state bond monies for land acquisition in the FY-1998 budget. If approved for funding, the request will bring total funding available for land acquisition to \$25.6 million.

As of February 1997, DNR had obligated \$5.3 million to acquire 5,800 acres of riverfront lands. Additional properties under negotiation have an estimated value of \$28.5 million. DNR expects to request additional funds for land acquisition in FY-1999. The amount of the request will depend on the level of need for funds at the time.

RiverCare 2000 will further attempt to leverage other sources of funding--federal, local and private--for land acquisition. For example, the U.S. Dept. of Interior has recommended \$1 million under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act to support wetland acquisition on the Ocmulgee River near Macon.

Local governments and conservation organizations will increase the likelihood of state participation in a local corridor project if they can share some of the acquisition, operation and maintenance costs. The state will also seek support from private foundations for selected projects.

To be fully effective, RiverCare 2000 must make a meaningful effort to inform and educate Georgians about the values and vulnerabilities of the state's rivers and about sound watershed management practices. The advisory team on protection tools will make recommendations about information and education activities and funding needs.

State funds will be required to prepare brochures, videos and other communications devices for use with conservation and historic preservation groups, mayors, county commissioners, organizations of farmers and foresters, and other audiences. For example, the state is funding the preparation of a brochure which explains to private landowners the value of conservation easements, and a more detailed explanation of the benefits and procedures involved in placing a conservation easement on private lands. The Georgia Land Trust Service Center is preparing these publications, which the state will print, and both DNR and the Center will distribute. The Center will serve as the primary point of contact for persons who wish to learn more about conservation easements. It will refer private owners to the most appropriate conservation easement holder for further discussions. This partnership makes effective use of state funds by leveraging the Center's expertise with conservation easements. The state will seek other partnership opportunities to make the best use of the limited funds available for river conservation.

## **INFORMATION SOURCE**

For more information about the RiverCare 2000 Program, please contact: Mr. Harvey Young at tel: 706-657-9746 or send Email to: Harvey\_Young@mail.dnr.state.ga.us