Conservation Funding Under Attack

Development threatens Georgia’s trails

This April, President Barack Obama asked Congress to fully fund a program that could preserve open space across the country. In response, certain members of Congress advanced a different plan: slashing the program’s budget to an all-time low, and leaving all of Georgia’s trails vulnerable to logging and development.

Environment Georgia is pressing Sens. Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson to support the president’s proposal to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)—and fight to bring those dollars to Georgia, where development consumes 100 acres of green space every week.

Appalachian Trail is vulnerable

The Appalachian Trail winds 76 miles through Georgia’s gentle mountains before continuing up the coast until Maine. Meanwhile, the lesser-known Benton MacKaye Trails runs 80 miles in Georgia before continuing into Tennessee and North Carolina.

These trails display the best of Georgia: our cool mountain streams, forested mountains, and hilltops covered by rhododendrons. However, these trails are surrounded by—and sometimes run directly through—privately held land that is vulnerable to encroaching development. To access a home on land along the Appalachian Trail, owners must drive over the pathway itself to access their property.

Full funding for the LWCF

The LWCF has been a major source of money for wilderness purchases. Established in 1965, it was designed to offset potential destruction to land and water from oil drilling. But to date, the LWCF has only achieved full funding twice.

“We can protect these trails by securing federal funding and permanently conserving the private land that runs next to them,” said Jennette Gayer, advocate for Environment Georgia.

“Doing so will protect wildlife, habitat and watersheds, and ensure that hikers can continue to enjoy beautiful views for generations to come.”

Sprawl consumes 100 acres of green space in Georgia every week.

Athens, Ga.

Links to additional content are posted on our website: www.EnvironmentGeorgia.org
Recent action

2010 was breakthrough year for solar

In an otherwise lackluster year for the economy the solar industry shone brighter than ever in 2010, with a 67 percent increase in the amount of solar energy projects installed across America compared to 2009.

That means millions more homes and businesses powered by pollution-free solar energy, an increase made possible by strong solar policies implemented at the urging of Environment Georgia and our state affiliates. In December, Clean Energy Advocate Sean Garren led our charge in Congress to extend critical incentives for solar power. In Georgia, state legislators approved an extension and expansion of state incentives for solar.

Environment Georgia staff continue to strategize with entrepreneurs within the solar industry to hit a far more ambitious benchmark: getting 10 percent of our nation’s energy from solar by 2030.

Trash industry attacks composting

Despite hard work from Environment Georgia activists and our allies, lobbyists for the solid waste industry successfully rolled back a 14-year-old ban on dumping yard trimmings into Georgia landfills.

Lobbyists for the trash industry wrongly defended the proposal as a “green” way to create renewable energy through the collection of the methane gas that landfills produce. However, since up to 40 percent of methane escapes, the organic materials will only contribute to Georgia’s global warming pollution.

As of 2001, there were 38 facilities composting over a half-million tons of organic waste material each year that would have otherwise ended up in landfills. This compost and mulch is great for reducing soil erosion as well as water runoff. It also supports agriculture, horticulture and landscaping industries in Georgia.
There’s no doubt that the Clean Air Act, which turned 40 in 2010, has improved the health and well-being of millions of Americans. Its protections are credited with saving the lives of 160,000 Americans in 2010 alone.

Of course, air pollution remains a pressing health threat in this country, and a stark reminder of the work still left to do. As a result of heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks and other fatal conditions brought on or exacerbated by air pollution from power plants, over 13,200 Americans have lost their lives. It’s estimated that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her bloodstream—a byproduct of coal power production—to put her child at risk should she become pregnant.

Thankfully, the Obama administration has announced it will seek to strengthen and update portions of the Clean Air Act in the coming months.

“Our health is too important to delay these new pollution standards,” Jennette Gayer, advocate for Environment Georgia, wrote in a guest column for the Saport Report. “The Clean Air Act has proven to be one of the greatest tools we have to cost-effectively protect Americans’ health and our environment.”

An assault on our health
With some vocal opponents of the Clean Air Act throwing their weight around in Congress, Environment Georgia, the American Lung Association and other public health organizations are building support to make sure the administration’s proposals go through.

A recent report by Environment Georgia shows that Georgia’s power plants emit over 3,800 pounds of mercury annually, and across our western border, Alabama emits even more. Much of this mercury ends up in our waterways and fish. Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has placed fish consumption warnings on over a dozen lakes and thousands of miles of rivers and streams, including the Chattahoochee River, because of mercury contamination.

According to the report, “Dirty Energy’s Assault on our Health,” power plants released 134,000 pounds of mercury into our environment in 2009 alone.

A taste of things to come?
The Obama administration’s updates to the Clean Air Act face great uncertainty, with polluting industries and their allies in Congress launching an all-out assault on the Clean Air Act.

In February, the House of Representatives attached a provision to a federal funding bill that would have blocked the EPA from cutting mercury pollution from cement plants, cleaning up soot pollution, and reducing carbon dioxide from coal-fired plants.

Less than a month later, the Senate rejected the funding bill, with many senators citing the environmental and public health attacks within the bill as one of the reasons for their opposition.

Now is an important time to make sure voices are heard in favor of preserving the undeveloped beaches, dunes and live oak forests that make this island so special—and hundreds of Environment Georgia activists weighed in this February.

Environment Georgia is urging an oversight committee to strengthen a plan to keep Jekyll Island natural by clarifying the criteria that will be used to approve or deny future development proposals; specifying who makes these decisions; requiring any future developments to be low-impact structures; and strengthening proposals for conservation efforts.

Jekyll Island, a scenic barrier island off Georgia’s coast, is an important nesting ground for sea turtles and a beloved state park that belongs to each and every one of us.

But irresponsible development poses an ongoing threat to the island, consuming the habitat that shelters wildlife. The authority that oversees the island has commissioned a Conservation Plan, and a reworking of their Master Plan seems likely to follow. As it currently stands, the Master Plan leaves open critical loopholes that could allow for more development along the island’s pristine coastline.

Georgia law requires 65 percent of the island be preserved and undeveloped. However, rather than specifying critical areas that should be preserved, the plan avoids this decision and undermines the spirit of the law by counting salt marshes as part of the island’s land mass. This method allows for more development on solid ground.

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It’s common sense: A healthy river or stream needs clean and plentiful water. Once a river’s health is threatened, all those who rely on it for drinking water, livelihood or habitat will suffer. But today, developers and other special interests can pipe river water long distances, legally drawing millions of gallons of water from one river, and then dumping it as treated sewage into another, without regard for the environmental impacts—or the detrimental effects on the surrounding communities.

In conjunction with the Georgia Water Coalition, we asked the Georgia Legislature for rules that require careful review and public scrutiny before any large transfers of water from one river basin to another. Current law recommends such a review but falls short of requiring it—an important distinction.

Unfortunately, bills to address interbasin transfers stalled in both the House and the Senate. “We must learn to live within our means, instead of relying on expensive and potentially harmful piping schemes for our water supply and growth,” said Jennette Gayer, advocate for Environment Georgia.