

An additional meeting scheduled for October 11th, 2024 at Strickland's Lodge in Nahunta, GA was canceled following the devastation caused by Hurricane Helene to many parts of the state. Our sympathies remain with fellow Georgians in southern and eastern Georgia who continue to rebuild their communities. During the November 13th meeting, time was allocated to discuss the challenges facing South Georgia, including issues unique to South Georgia rivers and water infrastructure post-Helene.

COMMITTEE FINDINGS

Georgia's Water Landscape

Water has shaped Georgia's land, history, economy, ecology, and people. Georgia's rivers helped shape the colony's earliest cities and the state's westward expansion into the interior. The state's waterways have helped power Georgia's mills, transport produce and timber downstream, electrify rural communities, and supply water to farms and homes across the state. Rivers shaped the boundaries of land grants, cities, and counties. The state's waterways in its 14 river basins have provided vital ecosystems for plant and animal species in the state. In addition, Georgia's rivers have been a haven for various recreational opportunities, be it fishing, hunting, canoeing, kayaking, rafting, or tubing.

The committee discussed and heard about the diversity of rivers, streams, and tributaries in Georgia. Georgia has 70,150 miles of rivers and streams, from smaller, cold-water streams in the North Georgia mountains to blackwater rivers in South Georgia like the Altamaha and Ogeechee.⁴ These rivers and streams have different geographic features, water flows, and accompanying wildlife species, all impacted by the diversity in topographies enjoyed by the state.

Georgia watercourses flow through different communities, who have established histories and local traditions. Generations of families have fished, hunted, boated and lived along these rivers and streams. The committee heard from landowners, fishermen, paddlers, and ecologists about the need to consider each river or stream uniquely, and that before seeking to classify a particular waterway, they recommended taking into account the ecological and physical characteristics of each waterway.

Fishing is important to Georgia's economy and identity. As stated by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources during its testimony, Georgia has more than 1.1 million licensed anglers, more than 14,800 jobs connected to fishing, and at least \$1.5 billion in fishing retail sales. Those retail sales have led to more than \$85 million over the past 10 years returning to the state from federal excise taxes on fishing equipment. Fishing as a tradition is enshrined in Article I, Section I, Paragraph XXVIII of the Georgia Constitution, which states that "[t]he tradition of fishing and hunting and the taking of fish and wildlife shall be preserved for the people and shall be managed by law and regulation for the public good." In addition, with respect to wildlife, O.C.G.A. §27-1-3

⁴ <https://gadnr.org/resources>