



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#2 Flint River

Georgia

Threat: Proposed water supply dams

SUMMARY

Well loved by anglers, boaters and Georgia families, the Flint River is one of the state's most valuable natural treasures. But a two-year drought in the Southeast has revived calls to dam the Flint, even though more effective water supply solutions would save Atlanta as much as \$700 million. Congress must deny attempts to authorize new dams on the Flint, and Metro Atlanta must make water efficiency the backbone of its water supply strategy.

THE RIVER

The Flint River originates south of Atlanta and flows 350 miles southeast to join the Chattahoochee River at the Georgia-Florida-Alabama state line. The Flint is one of forty rivers nationwide that still flows undammed for more than 200 miles. The river and its healthy wetlands and floodplains are home to the unique shoal lily, shoal bass, Halloween darter, and 22 species of mussels. The Flint's lower stretches contain springs, seeps, and caves that are habitat for the endemic Georgia blind cave salamander and Dougherty plain cave crayfish.

More than 245 million gallons of water from the upper Flint River and its associated aquifer are used each day for industrial uses and drinking water for the 600,000 residents in the basin. Flint River water is used to irrigate more than 1,145,000 acres of peanuts, corn and other crops. The river is used extensively by fishermen and boaters, and many local economies depend on the Flint for tourism dollars.

THE THREAT

The Flint River dams were first proposed in 1945, and were vetoed by Jimmy Carter when he was governor. Now the outdated dam-building scheme is being dusted off again. Unfortunately, as the severe drought in north Georgia has spurred a search for new water supplies, it has not yet spurred a serious commitment to the cheapest and most reliable water source, water efficiency. The area's primary water source, Lake Lanier on the Chattahoochee River, has been at record low levels for the past year. The situation is dire enough that the 2008 Georgia Legislature passed a resolution to pursue moving the state line one mile into

Tennessee so Georgia could claim water from the Tennessee River. It also passed a bill to encourage the construction of several new water supply dams and reservoirs. In November, a study of reservoir sites was issued and included the two dams on the Flint as well as expansion of current reservoirs on the river's tributaries among the potential reservoir sites listed.

Wasteful water consumption is at the heart of Georgia's inability to keep more water in Lake Lanier, a primary cause of the 18-year "water war" between Georgia, Alabama and Florida over the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint (ACF) rivers. Congressman Nathan Deal (R-GA), whose district includes Lake Lanier, plans to introduce legislation to reauthorize three new dams on the Upper Flint in order to provide flows at the Florida line and keep more water in Lake Lanier. Congressman Lynn Westmoreland (R-GA), member of the appropriations committee, whose district includes the upper Flint, will likely seek to appropriate \$10 million to study the need for these dams and others on the upper river. The proposed Flint River dams would bury more than 50 river miles, destroy fishing and boating opportunities, and would waste massive amounts of taxpayer dollars.

Instead of damming the Flint to try to relieve Atlanta's water supply problems, the state should implement water efficiency solutions. Water efficiency measures cost \$0.46 to \$250 per 1000 gallons, while dams can cost \$4000 per 1000 gallons – even more if you include maintenance and operation costs. Dams are up to 8500 times more expensive than water efficiency solutions. Metro Atlanta could save up to \$700 million and provide more water than an entire new Lake Lanier by pursuing water efficiency as compared to building new dams.

Water efficiency is a much more reliable water supply strategy in a climate-challenged world. Building a dam doesn't guarantee that rain will fall and fill the reservoir. Further, dams are fixed in place and reservoirs hold a limited amount of water. Even when we do get sufficient rains to fill reservoirs, these pools can lose tremendous amounts of water to evaporation.

Counties and municipalities across the southeast region are already realizing the benefits of water efficiency. In 2000, nearby Greensboro, North Carolina implemented new water rates that bill wasteful use at a higher rate than conservative use. In only seven years, average household consumption has dropped 22 percent. Georgia's DeKalb County recently enacted a program that replaces outdated fixtures with water efficient products. If applied to all of its older and less water-efficient homes this program would secure nine million gallons of water per day while costing taxpayers only a tenth as much as an area dam proposal that would provide roughly the same amount of water. Metro Atlanta needs to show the same leadership or risk being left behind.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Federal River and Harbor Act of 1945 authorized three reservoirs on the Flint, which were de-authorized by President Carter. Congress must not allow reauthorization of these dams or waste taxpayer dollars to study the dams. Further, the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District Boards must improve the draft Metro-District water supply plan to

include enforceable water conservation requirements and keep proposals for damming the Flint out of their future water supply plans.

Other opportunities to protect the Flint River exist in 2009. On the campaign trail, President Barack Obama stated his support for S.3152, introduced by Florida Senator Bill Nelson, which would require much-needed scientific research to assess the water management and conservation needs of Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint rivers. The Florida delegation is ready to reintroduce this legislation in 2009, and Congress should pass it. The stimulus bill, passed in February, gives Georgia more than \$24 million for water efficiency projects. The state should use this money and more to obviate the need for new dams in Metro Atlanta and elsewhere, and invest in lasting water supply solutions.

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