

Wetland Conservation in Georgia

2021

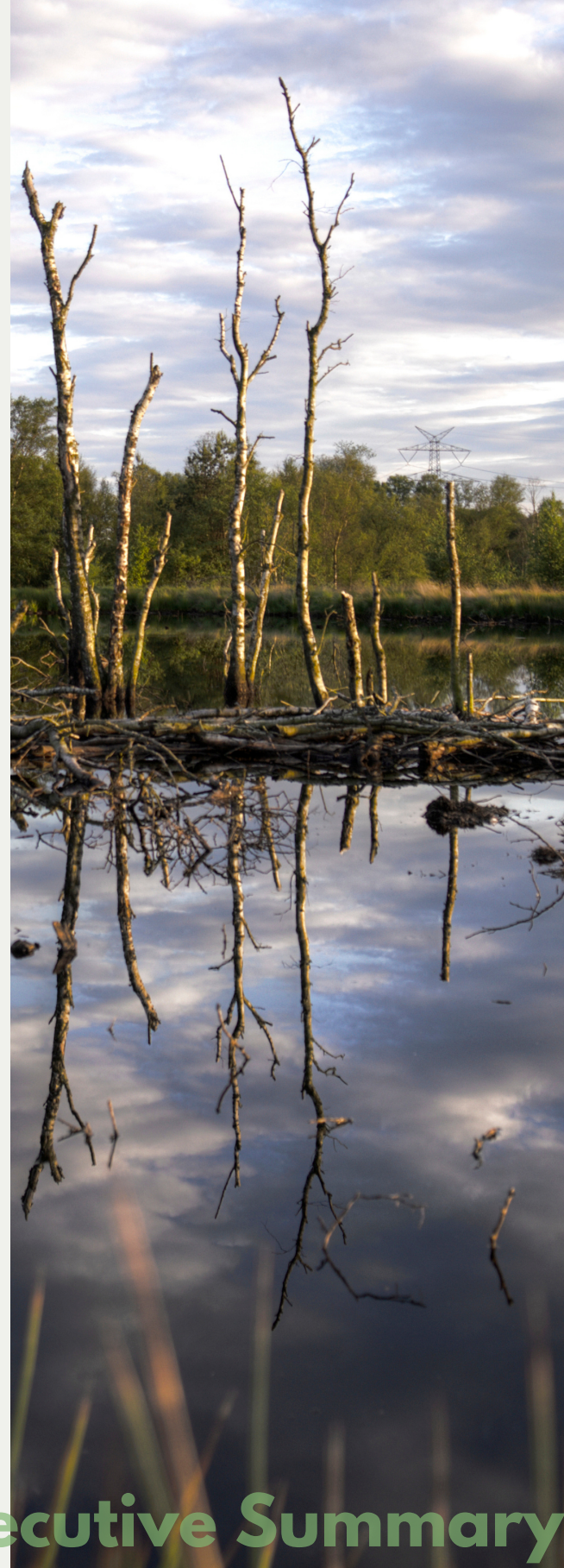


Frame the Issue

Wetlands in the state of Georgia cover approximately 18.4 percent of the state's landscape. Unfortunately, historical and current wetland losses due to land conversion have negatively impacted these sites. Historic losses prior to the 1980s paired with the more recent losses in wetland diversity (Dahl 2011) has negatively affected the hydrology of downstream communities. This in turn has social and ecological consequences, and the potential to negatively impact widespread Georgian communities. Wetlands protect homes and other infrastructure by dissipating the energy of floods; they stabilize stream flows during dry conditions; they improve the quality of drinking water by filtering out sediment and pollutants; they provide habitat corridors for wildlife; they provide significant social benefits in the form of recreational opportunities; and they reduce the impacts of climate change via carbon storage.

As an alternative to government regulations, voluntary wetland restoration will be critical to the long-term conservation of wetland areas. Current federally funded conservation incentive programs in Georgia are available for landowners that provide economic assistance to help achieve their land stewardship goals. However, these programs may not necessarily be adequate to reach Georgia's wetland conservation goals at the scale desired to sustain essential ecosystem services.

This report aims to provide information about how to strategically approach the creation of a viable program to incentivize wetland conservation on private lands in the state of Georgia. To compose these recommendations, report writers first researched and analyzed the need for an incentives-based conservation program in Georgia. Then, a variety of key stakeholders were engaged to understand their needs, priorities, and concerns. Based on research findings and stakeholder input, a basic recommended program outline was identified.



Executive Summary

Key Findings

In summary, this program should be targeted towards private forest landowners and aim to restore degraded wetlands to proper hydrological function, create and incentivize appropriate wetland forest management activity parameters, and protect wetland resources through long-term conservation easements.

A successful program will accomplish this through:

- Carefully crafting a wetland project prioritization process.
- Utilizing tax-based economic incentives.
- Expanding landowner eligibility.
- Defining site limitations and selecting appropriate wetlands based on those parameters.
- Basing payments off of completed program conservation activities.
- Including both restoration activities and protection criteria to ensure longevity of the wetland.
- Encouraging the continued implementation of Best Management Practices in forestry operations.

The next steps identified by this partnership and its stakeholders are: 1) understand why landowners are/are not utilizing current conservation programs, 2) collaborate with universities and other research entities to gather information on priority landscapes for restoration in Georgia and the needs and wants of landowners, 3) build a program that incorporates the suggestions defined in this report as well as additional logistical details, 4) strategize ways to market a program to gain support from a diverse coalition of taxpayers, and 5) implement a successful program. Some of the activities in these steps are linear, though some are not, and certain steps will be intertwined.



Opportunities

To protect and conserve the ecological and social functions of wetlands throughout the state, the need for an incentives-based wetlands conservation program in Georgia is great because most communities in the state of Georgia will benefit from the values provided by wetlands restored via an incentives program, as all wetland types provide ecological and socioeconomic benefits (De Steven and Lowrance 2011, Edwards et al 2013).

Economic incentive programs can often be structured to achieve greater conservation goals than that would result from traditional regulation (National Center for Environmental Economics 2001). This program, whether started from square one or incorporated into an existing program, will build on current regional conservation partnerships to further increase the capacity of wetlands conservation. A program sponsored and managed by the state of Georgia would bolster the valuable and foundational set of structures and services provided by existing federal packages in a highly effective, leveraged fashion. A statewide program would tap the great expertise that resides within Georgia's academic, land management, and advocacy communities to tailor conservation activities to the needs of local Georgians. The continuation of diverse stakeholder involvement will be imperative to share resources and expertise and eventually create a program feasible and attractive to a variety of supporters and participants.