

Muddy, dirty, soggy, and worth protecting:

Savannah's regulators guard Georgia's wetlands



The Savannah District Regulatory Division works throughout Georgia to ensure 'no net loss' of wetlands in the state. *Photo by Murphy Winn, USACE retiree.*

To the passerby it just looks like cleared woods, perhaps the future location for a corn field or a barnyard or a country store. But to the trained biologists and environmentalists of the Savannah District, the area could signal so much more – a disturbed wetland threatened with destruction.

"As part of my job I investigate possible violations of the Clean Water Act," said Katherine "Katie" Freas of Savannah District's Regulatory Division. "I determine where jurisdictional wetlands have been disturbed without a permit and work with the land owner to restore the land or come up with a way to mitigate what the person has damaged."

Wetlands provide a natural filter for ground water, removing pollutants, before the water soaks into groundwater, creeks or rivers, Freas said. Wetlands also provide a natural buffer against flooding. Disturbing the wetlands disrupts this valuable process.

"We work closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, which has the authority to assess penalties on violators," she said. "Repeat violators especially get our [Corps of Engineers and the EPA] attention, since they probably disturb the land intentionally."

Freas works in the Savannah District office. Co-workers in her location and three other offices scattered across Georgia share the responsibility to determine the extent

of development that impact streams and wetlands in the state – and work with violators to correct the damage.

"Wetlands play a vital role in our environment and therefore protecting them is a matter of necessity," said Shaun Blocker, also in the Savannah office. Blocker listed other functions provided by wetlands, including keeping sediment from running into water supplies and providing spawning sites for fish and other aquatic life.

Permits allow impacts

Not all of Freas' actions involve chasing violators. She spends much of her time teaching individuals or companies to abide by the rules that govern impacts to wetlands.

"Most people are unaware of the Corps of Engineers' rules for wetlands and streams on their property," Freas said.

"As regulators, we must make balanced, fair, and flexible permit decisions in administering Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act," Blocker said in discussing the primary laws governing regulatory permitting. "Basically, throughout the permit process, from pre-application meetings through the final permit authorization, we work with an applicant to provide guidance, and still consider the applicant's or public's need for the project."

Our goal is to achieve an acceptable resolution for all parties involved.”

“Part of our mission is ‘no net loss’ of wetlands” said Carol Bernstein, Chief of the Coastal Branch in the Regulatory office. “In order to achieve ‘no net loss,’ all impacts (including unauthorized impacts) must be offset.”

Balancing “no net loss” of wetlands with rapid state growth can test the Savannah District’s regulators’ resourcefulness. “Georgia is a very wet state,” Bernstein said of the state’s abundant wetlands.

Balancing human and environmental needs

In spite of the relative “wetness” of Georgia, readily accessible clean water for a growing population remains problematic for local governments. The Piedmont Branch office near metro-Atlanta faces water supply issues routinely.

“Water-supply reservoir permit applications are some of the most complex and controversial applications evaluated in the Regulatory Program,” said Ed Johnson Chief of the Piedmont Branch. “Rapid expansion in the counties in the metro area created the need for several new residential and retail developments. This growth has also created the need for new infrastructure to include roads, sewage line, waterlines and water supply reservoirs.”

“Not allowing any impacts to wetlands would be a detriment to both the local and state economy, and subsequently the national economy,” Bernstein said.



Katie Freas, Savannah District Regulatory Division, tests moisture in soil using a hand squeeze. Among her duties, Freas determines where land owners have disturbed wetlands using a variety of field tests. *USACE photo by Billy Birdwell.*



Examining mud and soil makes up part of the job of a Savannah District regulatory specialist. *USACE photo by Billy Birdwell.*

A matter of education

Sometimes those who violate the Clean Water Act simply have no understanding of the law or permitting process.

“Often, violators are not familiar with our program and so they don’t realize that they are in violation of the acts,” Bernstein said. “As regulators, we try to work with the violator to restore or mitigate any unnecessary impacts, while at the same time permitting those impacts that are necessary to achieve their project purpose.”

Public outreach proves crucial, Johnson said. “The Piedmont Branch meets with municipalities, schools, non-governmental organizations, and environmental groups in an effort to ensure ‘no net loss’ of wetlands through education,” Johnson said. The Piedmont Branch also conducts workshops with environmental consultants to educate them on changes to the Regulatory Program.

Occasionally, however, violations occur intentionally. Reports from Georgia regulators, environmental groups and just concerned neighbors, can lead to an investigation, according to Freas. In extreme cases, when repeat violators ignore the law, the Savannah District turns the case over to the U.S. Justice Department for possible civil fines or prosecution.

However it ends, in court or with apologetic repairs to wetlands by a property owner or developer, the restoration helps balance the crucial functions of Georgia’s wetlands – all from the trained eyes of the Savannah District regulatory team. 

By Billy Birdwell