



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Protecting flora and fauna of the Savannah River Basin

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Nationwide, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have a long history of working together to address water resource issues. Those issues are not unique to any one region. In most cases, it comes down to an equitable sharing of limited amounts of water and how that lack of quantity will affect the quality of life for the consumers.

By consumers, we don't just mean the human-kind. As a Federal agency charged by Congress to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people, our goal is to provide a necessary level of stewardship for natural resources that include threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, interjurisdictional fish, and Service lands, like our National Wildlife Refuges.

The protracted drought in the Southeast has created many issues up and down the Savannah River Basin. From limits on recreation, to water withdrawal limitations for municipalities, the issues are numerous. And according to the latest U.S. Seasonal Drought Outlook, produced by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the southeastern drought is predicted to persist and intensify with only some minor improvements possible for the lower portions of the Savannah River Basin.

When the Service is asked to provide input to the Corps regarding operations of the Savannah River projects, we base our comments and recommendations on the best science we have. That science includes years of studies on the flora and fauna that inhabit the Savannah River Basin.

Some of the science shows that only fragments of habitat remain due to expansive reservoir development, water diversion, and water removal. We know what many of the needs are for some of those species, as well as threats to their existence. For most of these aquatic species, their basic needs include good water

quality and water volumes that seasonally increase and decrease.

Consequently, we ask the Corps to take these needs into consideration as they derive their operational plans. Without such consideration, the wildlife we are charged with protecting could suffer permanent damages from a protracted drought and reduced downstream flows, especially for species restricted to the few remaining habitat fragments.

For example, low flows can impact the water quality of backwater habitats—which are important for bass and fishing. We know that reduced flows will cause salty water to move upriver, impacting highly-productive freshwater marshes at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge and the ducks that use the freshwater habitat. We are concerned that shortnose sturgeon will be cut off from the gravel bars in the river. Large shortnose sturgeon need to access the few remaining gravel bars so that they may breed.

We have already observed drying of habitats that are important to freshwater mussels like the Savannah lilliput and the Altamaha arc mussel. We are already witnessing some of these impacts. For some species, these protracted periods of drought will be the death knell—their survival eliminated. As an agency charged with the protection of wildlife and rare species, we advocate on their behalf in hopes that damages can be avoided or reversed.

As the agencies work together to balance the needs of ALL users in the system, providing protection for imperiled species and their habitats is paramount to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Extinction allows for no equitability.

**—Provided by Jennifer Koches and Sandy Tucker,
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service**