State Highlights in Conservation: Georgia

Profile of State Program(s)

Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund: In November 2018, Georgia voters approved a constitutional amendment dedicating $200 million over ten years (approximately $20 million per year) for local parks and conservation throughout the state. This measure passed overwhelmingly with 83 percent support. The constitutional amendment created the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund, which will protect Georgia’s water, land, and wildlife for future generations. A state constitutional amendment, the Stewardship Act dedicates a portion of the existing sales and use tax on outdoor sporting goods to land conservation and parks for 10 years. Funding from the Stewardship Act will protect forests, wildlife habitat, and land critical to clean drinking water. Funding will also be used to acquire and improve parks and trails in communities throughout the state—as well as to protect and maintain state parks and wildlife areas.

Preservation 2000: Initiated by the Governor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Preservation 2000 was funded through General Assembly and was designed to secure lands that provided for a variety of recreational uses, including parks and wildlife management areas. Preservation 2000 was completed in 2001 having protected more than 100,000 acres.

RiverCare 2000: RiverCare 2000 is a conservation program, which started in 1997 and ended in 2002. It consisted of three related tasks: assessing important river resources throughout the state, identifying more effective management tools for river corridors, and acquiring riverfront lands for the program. The Department of Natural Resources administered the program, with guidance from four citizen advisory groups. The program acquired more than 47,000 acres of riverfront land. River Care 2000 Program sought specifically to protect wildlife management areas, parks, natural areas, greenways and similar sites along rivers and streams in Georgia. The Department of Natural Resources acquired and continues to manage these lands. It chiefly sought unaltered, old growth forest, and wetlands, including river bottom hardwood forests, Carolina bays, and other naturally occurring water features. RiverCare 2000 was funded mainly through state bond funds. RiverCare 2000 and Preservation 2000 no longer exist.

Georgia Community Greenspace Program: The Georgia General Assembly created the Georgia Greenspace Program during the 2000 legislative session. The statute created a Georgia Greenspace Trust Fund, which was funded annually by the Georgia General Assembly. Greenspace grant funds are provided to assist local governments in carrying out their strategies for acquiring and permanently protecting land. In order to receive grants local governments had to create a Community Greenspace Program and a Community Greenspace Trust Fund as specified by the statute. The program was administered by the Department of Natural Resources. A five-member Georgia Greenspace Commission reviewed and approved community greenspace programs submitted by eligible counties. The statute defined “greenspace” as permanently protected land and water, including agricultural and forestry land, which is in its undeveloped, natural state or that has been developed only to the extent consistent with, or is restored to be consistent with, one or more listed goals for natural resource protection or informal recreation. The Georgia Land Conservation Program replaced this program in 2005.

Georgia Land Conservation Program: The Georgia Land Conservation Program, when funding is available, offers competitive grants for purchased...
outright (fee simple) or conservation easement acquisitions from the Georgia Land Conservation Trust Fund. It has been funded by state appropriations since its creation in 2005. It also offers low-interest loans for fee title or conservation easement purchases from the Georgia Land Conservation Revolving Fund. The program is administered by the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority and is directed by the Land Conservation Council, a mix of gubernatorial appointees and state agency heads. The program provides funds to land conservation projects having one or more of the following purposes: water quality protection, flood and wetland protection, erosion prevention, wildlife habitat protection, maintenance of prime agricultural and forestry lands, scenic protection, provision of outdoor recreation, connecting conservation lands, or historic resource protection.

**Georgia Department of Natural Resources:** DNR manages over one million acres of public land in state parks, natural areas, public fishing areas, and wildlife management areas. In addition to other funding sources noted here, the Department of Natural Resources also manages its own acquisitions priorities and funding streams to conserve the state’s natural resources. The DNR works with funds appropriated by the legislature annually to pursue land conservation opportunities. DNR also handles the certification for the conservation tax credit program and works closely with the Georgia Land Conservation Program.

**Substantial State Investment**

A major breakthrough came in 2018 when Georgia lawmakers referred a constitutional amendment to the November ballot that would create a permanent funding source for land and water conservation. The Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act was overwhelmingly approved by voters with 83 percent support. The new state constitutional amendment dedicated a portion of the existing sales and use tax on outdoor sporting goods to land conservation and parks for ten years. Funding will protect working forests, wildlife habitat, and land critical to clean drinking water, and to acquire and improve parks and trails in communities throughout the state.

**State Incentive for Local Conservation Funding**

The Georgia Land Conservation Program offers grants for fee title or conservation easement purchases from the Georgia Land Conservation Trust Fund. It also offers low-interest loans for fee title or conservation easement purchases from the Georgia Land Conservation Revolving Fund. Tax incentives are also available for donations of conservation lands or conservation easements. Grants are offered on the basis of project urgency and available non-state match offered by a grant applicant.

**Conservation Tax Credits**

Started in 2006, the Georgia Conservation Tax Credit Program provides a financial incentive to encourage landowners to help conserve land and natural resources in the state. The program accepts donations of land or conservation easements. The incentive is provided in the form of a state income tax credit that can be applied in the tax year of the donation; any unused tax credit may be carried forward and applied to the landowner’s tax liability for up to ten succeeding years. Donors may earn tax credits up to 25 percent of the fair market value of the donated property. For individual landowners, the total amount of the tax credit cannot exceed $250,000. For corporate landowners, the total tax credit cannot exceed $500,000.

**Local Financing Enabled**

In Georgia, the three major local financing options that exist for the acquisition of parks and greenspace are the property tax, general obligation bonds and the special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST). Every county and municipality in Georgia has the authority under the Constitution to create a separate, countywide (or municipal) tax district, to levy a property tax, or issue a general obligation or revenue bond for the provision of parks and recreation (or any government service for that matter). General obligation bonds are one of the more popular finance mechanism for funding land conservation across the state, however SPLOST is the most widely used financing vehicle for Georgia counties to pay for major capital improvements. Although most commonly the SPLOST has been used to fund road construction, jails and county buildings, a handful of counties have used the SPLOST to fund land conservation.

**Local Programs Included**

Local conservation programs include:

- Athens-Clarke County, GA
• Atlanta, GA  
• Cherokee County, GA  
• Cobb County, GA  
• DeKalb County, GA  
• Forsyth County, GA  
• Paulding County, GA  

Visit www.landvote.org for detailed information on these programs.

**Federal Partnerships**

Federal agencies and programs that have conserved land in Georgia include:

- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program  
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA)  
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Section 6 Grant  
- U.S. Forest Service  
- U.S. Forest Service – Forest Legacy Program (FLP)  
- U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program (CELCP)  
- U.S. National Park Service  
- U.S. National Park Service – LWCF Stateside  
- U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service – Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP)  
- U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service – Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

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**The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.**

**The Conservation Almanac**

A comprehensive database of land conservation and public conservation funding in America, the Conservation Almanac provides a context for assessing impacts of conservation and the growing conservation finance movement. The Almanac offers information on public dollars spent and acres conserved, details on local, state, and federal conservation programs, and geospatial mapping of conserved land.

Almanac data collection efforts focus on land conserved using public dollars; contributions funded by private and non-governmental organizations are not tracked comprehensively. Federal data is complete from 1998-2017. State and local data is complete from 1998-2011. In the tables and charts below, acres are allocated to each program proportionate to the size of the contributions to each acquisition. For example, if an acquisition had two contributions, and each program contributed equal dollar amounts, each program receives 50% of the acres. If you have questions or want to provide updated information, please contact Jessica Welch at jessica.welch@tpl.org.

**www.tpl.org**

**www.conservationalmanac.org**
The data in the Conservation Almanac track the impacts of public spending on land conservation. Created by The Trust for Public Land, the Conservation Almanac brings those data together along with state policy profiles, current conservation finance news, and an interactive map, to provide a powerful online tool.

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