

2025 Legislative Session

# TNC in Georgia



## Executive Summary

Policy and government relations work is an essential component of how The Nature Conservancy achieves conservation progress in Georgia and beyond. Through our relationships at the federal, state, county, and city levels, we advocate for policies and practices that advance protection of our lands and waters and enhance our ability to address climate change in alignment with TNC's 2030 goals.

TNC Georgia's staff and trustees engage with members of Congress, state legislators, city and county officials, and state and federal agency personnel to drive policy and funding decisions that support our programmatic priorities. As January 2025 brings both a new Congress and Administration in Washington and a new legislative session for the Georgia General Assembly, TNC's government relations team will be working to advance policies that support positive outcomes for conservation and climate

# Legislative Priorities

## Land and Water Conservation

We will support policy and funding that advances land and water conservation in Georgia. TNC has been instrumental in conserving more than 400,000 acres across our state, and we will continue our productive collaborations with partners to protect more than 30,000 additional acres by 2030. Wise state policies and practices also play a pivotal role in protecting water quality and quantity in Georgia's rivers and tributaries and in preserving the health of our coastal and marine habitats. We anticipate the following areas of priority for legislative focus:

- **Protecting the Okefenokee:** We will continue collaborating with allies to secure legislative or administrative remedies to protect the Okefenokee Swamp and National Wildlife Refuge from mining operations that could cause irreversible damage to this unique ecosystem and to the communities that rely on it for jobs and economic vitality.
- **Sustaining Healthy Waters:** Furthering our ongoing work with partners to conserve the Lower Flint River basin, we will develop policy measures aligned with the implementation of a new Habitat Conservation Plan to enhance sustainability in the basin. We will also assess remedies to stem the ecological damage being caused in streams and rivers by the ill-advised removal of fallen trees and other large woody debris that are critical to aquatic habitats.
- **Conservation Financing:** We will explore opportunities to enhance funding for conservation. We will collaborate with partners in examining options for reauthorizing the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program at higher funding levels. We will also study other ideas proposed for new funding to support conservation and land protection, such as the creation of a state conservation bank.
- **Coastal Marshland Protection:** Mindful of attempts in recent legislative sessions to weaken the state's ability to safeguard the coastal marshlands that support Georgia's fisheries, we will closely monitor any bills related to coastal marshland use.
- **Greenspace Protection:** We will support projects and policies that reduce impacts to green spaces and water resources, improve urban resilience, and enhance sustainable

growth. TNC continues to engage officials with the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to implement measures to protect, connect, and activate greenspace in the South River Forest area. In north Georgia, we seek to mitigate environmental impacts from a proposed mining operation adjacent to a new Pine Log Wildlife Management Area.



## Climate Action

The irony was clear to all when legislative committees that were formed in 2024 to study disaster mitigation and resilience had to reschedule planned meetings due to the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. The staggering damage inflicted on communities in Georgia and beyond by these storms underscored the urgent need for enhanced planning and coordination to mitigate the effects of such extreme weather events.

2024 was a notable year for a far more positive reason as well. The State of Georgia developed its first-ever climate action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As the plan was developed, TNC staff met with the organizers at the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to discuss the value of natural climate solutions and to connect EPD with key stakeholders. Although the U.S. EPA chose not to provide additional funding for implementation of Georgia's "Peach State Voluntary Emissions Reduction Plan," the plan provides a roadmap of initiatives that, if properly utilized, would significantly reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions. TNC will work with EPD and other partners to advance such initiatives.

- **Enhancing Georgia's Resilience:** We support the recommendation from the House Study Committee on Disaster Mitigation and Resilience to establish a state Office of Resilience and a Chief Resilience Officer for Georgia that is modeled on similar approaches undertaken in South Carolina and Florida. The Nature

Conservancy met with committee members during their meetings this fall and provided them with background information, including examples of our work to strengthen the capacity of coastal communities to prepare for and manage climate events.

- **Renewable Energy and Decarbonization:** We will support state and local policy measures to accelerate the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and expand the use of clean energy in ways that minimize adverse impacts on natural lands and habitats. Relevant legislation includes measures to expand the use of rooftop and community solar and other distributed generation, the creation of infrastructure supporting electric vehicle usage, and the adoption of clean energy goals and climate action plans. We will defend against measures that would impede progress in these areas. We are also closely monitoring developments related to the growing number of data centers being built in Georgia. Data centers are having significant and often unforeseen impacts on energy demand, land use decisions, and water resources. Georgia is one of the top states seeing dramatic increases in the establishment of new data centers.
- **Natural Climate Solutions:** We will support opportunities to incentivize practices like reforestation and improved forest management that provide dual benefits for climate and conservation.



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