



## **St. Marys River Management Committee** 2004 Annual Report

To the County Commissioners:

The St. Marys River Management Committee (SMRMC) is a quasi-governmental advisory panel established by interlocal agreement between Baker and Nassau counties, Florida, and Camden and Charlton counties, Georgia. The committee is comprised of four voting representatives from each county, two St. Marys riverfront landowners and two at-large members, appointed by their county commissions, as well as a commissioner from each county. Representatives of Georgia and Florida state agencies serve in non-voting, advisory roles. Tasked by the county commissioners to develop a community-based and locally implemented plan for protecting public interests in the extraordinary scenic, scientific and water quality values of the St. Marys River in ways that protect private property and economic interests, the SMRMC developed a river management plan. Reviewed in public workshops, the St. Marys River Management Plan was ratified by the four counties in the winter of 2000.

### **Executive Summary**

In 2004, the St Marys River Management Committee continued to work upon **implementation of the priority strategies** detailed in the river management plan. These strategies include the establishment of consistent septic system setbacks along the river and addressing a range of issues related to the differing jurisdictions of an interstate river. The latter were the subject of a well-attended Bank-To-Bank workshop held in October of 2003, which generated several 2004 action items. SMRMC's input is increasingly sought by state agencies responsible for watershed management and water quality protection, such as Florida Department of Environmental Protection, St. Johns River Water Management District, and Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

SMRMC obtained a \$2,200 **U.S. Boat Foundation grant** for litter abatement signage, which is to be placed at several public and semi-public river accesses in all four counties in 2005. The Nature Conservancy's Trish Gramajo drafted the grant request for the

committee and St. Johns River Water Management District provided valuable assistance in designing the signs.

SMRMC supported **Boating Safety courses** in Camden County, Georgia. Camden County SMRMC representative Donny Rominger served as a coordinator. Rominger and another Camden SMRMC representative, Bob Merck (who also participated as a student), provided refreshments on behalf of the St. Marys River Management Committee. The course instructor was Chris Hodge of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

SMRMC reviewed the **Florida Department of Environmental Protection TMDL/Watershed Management Plan**. The plan was presented in March by FDEP's John Abendroth, who noted that county planning and protective ordinances can maintain high water quality conditions and avoid the imposition of state mandated standards.

SMRMC's major annual public event, the **St. Marys River Celebration**, was held Saturday, March 20. Coordinated by SMRMC vice-chair and Nassau County representative Dean Woehrle, 751 volunteers collected 51,000 pounds of trash from the St. Marys River, the second largest haul in the history of the river cleanup. White Oak Plantation hosted a post-cleanup luncheon for the participants.

Amanda Loach of Northeast Florida Regional Council assisted the committee with a **review of Georgia and Florida wildlife laws and safety regulations** pertaining to the St. Marys River. Loach wrote an initial abstract, which was reviewed by the committee in June and referred to subcommittee for further review and investigation. Considerable reciprocity exists in Florida-Georgia fish and wildlife regulations, but inconsistencies in boating regulations (e.g. operator age requirements and wake zones) remain.

Amy McGowan and Julie Todd of Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Environmental Protection Department (EPD) presented an update on **Georgia's Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) process**. The St. Marys Basin is currently in the data collection and analysis phase of the process, which will be followed by TMDL development.

SMRMC contacted landowners along two St. Marys tributary streams identified as "Impaired" by GA DNR-EPD, Cooner Branch and Horsepen Creek, and offered to help facilitate the **development of watershed associations** to deal with the issue. Interested landowners were invited to the regular meeting of the committee September 13. Turnout was very light and the concerns were largely unrelated to and beyond the scope of the committee's work. To date, no further interest in watershed association development has been indicated. Further sampling data from GA DNR to verify impairment is pending.

The committee was regularly presented with **river sampling data** by Paula Staples, Watershed Action Volunteers coordinator (WAV). WAV was recognized by Nassau County for its achievements this year.

SMRMC's septic setback subcommittee met with Baker County officials and commissioners regarding **SMRMC's recommended conservation overlay** for riverfront properties: 2-acre minimum lot size on riverfront lots, minimum 100 ft. setback of septic systems from the waterfront, and minimum 150 ft. lot width along the riverfront. These recommendations are consistent with the standards on the Georgia side of the river, and consistent riverfront standards are a priority strategy of the river management plan ratified by the counties. In the interests of maximum protection of private property rights and economic interests, SMRMC supports this as a minimal standard rather than an optimal standard, as much larger tracts associated with traditional land uses such as silviculture and agriculture are considered optimal for the maintenance of the river's current high values. SMRMC's considerable review of the scientific data strongly supports the recommended overlay as the minimal standard necessary to protect the water quality of rivers like the St. Marys: tannic "blackwater" streams with low dissolved oxygen, low nutrients and very low capacity for absorbing and assimilating additional excess nutrients, such as silt from runoff. The overlay has not yet been brought to a vote by the Baker County commissioners.

SMRMC continued publication of its public outreach media, a newsletter, **POSM (Patrons of the St. Marys River)**, and website, [www.stmarysriver.org](http://www.stmarysriver.org). The production values of both have been significantly enhanced with the assistance of St. Johns River Water Management District's publications department, and SMRMC deeply appreciates the District's valuable contributions to its community outreach and educational efforts.

SMRMC made a **presentation to the Projects and Land Committee of the St. Johns River Water Management District** in October, followed by a reception at White Oak Plantation. The District encouraged the SMRMC to make funding requests in time for the next funding cycle. Kraig McLane of the District facilitated a meeting of the full committee to identify funding requests for conservation acquisitions and easements, monitoring and assessments, and floodplain mapping.

White Oak Plantation hosted a **year-end holiday dinner** for the St. Marys River Management Committee and county commissioners. The committee recognized several individuals who provided invaluable support to the committee in 2004: Mike Branch, former Nassau County SMRMC representative, Trish Gramajo of The Nature Conservancy, and Melinda Granlund and Teresa Monson of the St. Johns River Water Management District.

Respectfully submitted,

Chip Campbell  
Chair, St. Marys River Management Committee