



St. Marys River Management Committee

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St. Marys River Management Committee

2009 Annual Report

To the County Commissioners:

Please accept this document as the committee's required annual report.

The St. Marys River Management Committee (SMRMC or committee) is a quasi-governmental advisory panel established by interlocal agreement between Baker and Nassau counties in Florida and Camden and Charlton counties in Georgia. The committee is comprised of five voting representatives from each county appointed by the county's Board of Commissioners: two riverfront landowners (or representatives if land owned by a corporation), two at-large members, and one county commissioner. Representatives of Georgia and Florida state agencies serve as non-voting advisors.

Summary of 2009 Committee Activity

In the St. Marys River Management Plan, one of the strategies for protection of surface water quality is consideration of "Special Waters" designation in Georgia and Florida (e.g. Outstanding Florida Waters - OFW). Students from the Conservation Law Clinic at the University of Florida began researching requirements and implications of OFW status in the fall of 2008 and presented their findings at the December 2008 SMRMC meeting. The committee had planned to discuss the findings in more detail with the counties in early 2009. However, we decided to postpone those meetings due to concerns voiced at the January 2009 meeting. Large timber companies (Rayonier, Plum Creek, and Toledo) said that the harvesting setbacks required by an OFW designation would be too limiting and that the setbacks imposed by the voluntary Best Management Practices were sufficient. Varn Co. said that they already observed the setbacks that would be imposed by OFW. Harold Stokes, a Nassau County citizen, was concerned that OFW status would infringe on an individual's right to choose what could be done on private property. Rob Mc Dowell, Georgia Environmental Protection Department, requested that the committee wait until Georgia's Statewide Water Management Plan was completed before pursuing status that would affect both states. He encouraged the committee to maintain contact with the two Regional Water Councils (Coastal and Suwannee-Satilla), into which the St. Marys River had been divided.

At the February meeting, SMRMC redirected its efforts to strategies promoting intergovernmental coordination between the four counties and the two states. The committee set up a task force (Septic Think Tank) to investigate the current septic tank regulations in the four counties and to suggest specific changes that would make them more consistent with each other. The River Basin Center, a

The St. Marys River Management Committee is an intergovernmental entity of elected and appointed members from the four counties fronting the river: Charlton and Camden, GA., and Nassau and Baker, FL.

The committee advises the four county commissions and provides a public forum on issues concerning the St. Marys.

cooperative effort between the Law School and the Department of Ecology at the University of Georgia, agreed to oversee this work. The committee also set up a task force to update the strategies in the Management Plan. The Conservation Law Clinic at the University of Florida Law School agreed to oversee this effort.

The Septic Think Tank group had several suggestions for the SMRMC: collect baseline water quality data from the two state data banks, promote distribution of permitting rules/regulations to citizens in all four counties, review possibility of community septic systems in each county, identify point-of-entry inspection for established septic systems in all counties, promote periodic pump-out every three to five years to all four counties, and identify current failing systems. Roxanne Groover, an engineer with Florida On-Site Wastewater Association, attended the early meetings to help get the task force organized. Because of staffing reductions at all counties and universities, compilation and verification of comparative data concerning septic tank regulations was delayed. Such data should be available by the end of 2010.

The Septic Think Tank group not only began work on compiling data about existing septic regulations but also filed several grants to support the research required to establish baseline data. In July, Laurie Fowler, with the River Basin Center at the University of Georgia, submitted an application to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for monies to support a sturgeon restoration project (see below). The grant included identifying the causes of high fecal coliform levels in several tributaries of the St. Marys River. The USDA did not support the grant but encouraged University of Georgia to resubmit the grant in 2010 with minor revisions. The task force also pursued 319 grants which are funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) but used at the discretion of the state departments of natural resource to rectify streams with 303d designations. If awarded, the monies will be used to identify and begin repair/replacement of failed septic systems and to help local governments develop policies promoting adequate ongoing management of onsite wastewater, thus eliminating future failures. The University of Georgia also filed a Camden/Charlton (Georgia) 319 grant application in November 2009. If either Baker or Nassau counties agree to be the lead agency, then the Florida 319 grant will be filed in mid-2010. Florida Environmental Department of Environmental Protection has said that they cannot financially support the repair/replacement segment of the grant but added that separate applications could be filed with the Department of Health, which oversees septic tank regulation.

The Strategies Task Force (now called the Adaptive Management Task Force) focused on updating SMRMC strategies and decided that a lack of cooperation between various agencies was the major management hurdle to overcome before trying to promote consistent water quality monitoring techniques needed to establish baseline data for water quality in various segments of the river. The task force recommended, and the SMRMC subsequently charged them with, holding a water quality technical meeting with representatives from key organizations of the two states (the full report is available online at www.law.ufl.edu/conservation/resources/pdf/stmarys.pdf). Because all Georgia DNR staff members were dedicated to working on their Statewide Water Plan, the task force postponed the technical meeting until the spring of 2010.

St. Marys Fisheries Restoration Committee (SMFRC) is also trying to collect baseline water quality data in order to determine the cause of the decline, and presumed extirpation from the river, of two species of sturgeon. If causes can be identified and remediated, the group hopes to restock the St. Marys River with sturgeon from the Altamaha River. Both SMRMC and SMFRC send representatives to each other's meetings to be sure that efforts are not duplicated. SMFRC was

successful in obtaining USDA funding and has begun training their members to do habitat assessments.

The 14th Annual River Clean-Up, held the third Saturday in March, attracted 1,050 participants including 120 Earthkeepers from the city of St. Marys, GA. An estimated 56,000 lbs. of trash were removed from the river and surrounding areas. River Clean-Up expenses exceeded contributions from sponsors; however, the cumulative total of donations over the years still exceeds expenses. It is anticipated that, as soon as the general economy improves, companies will be more able to donate funds.

Four committee members were assigned to attend meetings of the Satilla-Suwannee and the Coastal Georgia Regional Water Councils and to stay abreast of implications for the St. Marys River. Representatives attended meetings on May 6, June 24, June 25, November 11, November 17, September 23, and September 24, 2009.

Water supply was a topic of increased interest in all four counties. The committee noted that a large-scale regional planning process, "First Coast Reality Check: 2060", estimated an additional 1.6 million people would be living in the region by 2060. Also, the St. Marys River was identified as a potential alternative water supply source in early work on the St. Johns River Water Management District's District Water Supply Plan 2010. SMRMC attendees at the Georgia Regional Water Council meetings voiced concern about potential interbasin transfers.

Charlton County member, Russell Barber, submitted a Coastal Incentive Grant for a fishing dock at Trader's Hill Park. USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service also agreed to assist him with his ongoing effort to alleviate the erosion problem at the river access.

The committee wrote a letter in support of the grant to de-snag Thomas Creek, part of the Mills Creek drainage system and a tributary of the St. Marys River in Nassau County. The committee confirmed that the project only involved removal of debris and not channelization of the stream, and recommended the project be performed in the fall, rather than the summer, to minimize ecological damage to the stream.

In October, University of Florida Law School students drafted an open meeting protocol to address SMRMC concerns about adhering to the Florida and Georgia open meeting ("Sunshine") laws. The students researched applicable laws in both states and recommended a hybrid approach incorporating the most stringent regulations in each state. Committee members reviewed the recommended protocol and sent it to the four county attorneys for review. Action on the protocol was postponed until January 2010.

The state of Georgia partially funded a LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) flyover for the coastal counties. LIDAR uses a combination of laser and global positioning technologies to produce high resolution topographic maps. These maps have numerous applications including flood risk analysis, habitat mapping, and riparian studies, all of which could be useful for furthering knowledge of the St. Marys River. Each county was also required to contribute a portion of the funding. Camden County elected to participate; Charlton County did not participate because of budgetary constraints.

To implement a committee priority and strategy from the St. Marys River Management Plan, the committee retained the services of a part-time administrative assistant, Melinda Granlund, to help

with the monthly meetings and other committee projects. Granlund has begun managing the administrative and clerical tasks of the committee, including tasks such as taking minutes at meetings, sending out and posting meeting notices, updating the committee Web page, responding to inquiries and correspondence, filing, and general organization of the committee.

Nassau County member Amy Haddock resigned and was replaced by Jeremy Flood (Land Management Coordinator for TerraPointe Services, a division of Rayonier). Camden County member Rick Walsh resigned and was replaced by Karen Chisholm. Baker County appointed E.L. Padgett to the committee. There were still three vacancies in the Baker County delegation at year's end.

The committee hosted a holiday meeting at White Oak Plantation for invited county officials from the four counties. All commissioners and county attorneys, managers, planners, and wastewater treatment supervisors from Baker, Camden, Charlton, and Nassau counties were invited. This year's keynote speaker was John Moran, renowned nature photographer.

Respectfully submitted,

Dean Woerhle
Florida Co-Chair, SMRMC

Chip Campbell
Georgia Co-Chair, SMRMC

