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Facing federal budget cuts, Georgia alone cannot bear the brunt of environmental protection

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By Guest Columnist **GIL ROGERS**, *director of the Southern Environmental Law Center's Georgia and Alabama offices*

On July 4th, many Georgians celebrate by heading outdoors to cool off in rivers and lakes around the state, hike trails around Georgia's state parks, and enjoy the fireworks after running Atlanta's Peachtree Road Race, the world's largest 10K.

Yet as celebrations continue across the Peach State, Congress will face big decisions about the federal budget following the Fourth of July recess, and the profound effect it could have on Georgia and all who enjoy its abundant natural resources.

Under the Trump administration's proposed budget, the Environmental Protection Agency would endure one of the steepest budget cuts of the cabinet-level agencies. In real dollars, cutting over 30 percent of EPA's budget would represent the lowest level of protection for clean air and clean water in 40 years, when the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act were in their infancy.

While the blueprint budget is not yet set in stone – even if the current outline gets a stamp of approval by the House and the Senate, Congress will still need to pass spending bills for



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Gil Rogers

individual agencies – moving forward with cuts to critical federal programs would impact millions of Georgia families.

Despite pushback from both sides of the aisle in Congressional hearings, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt has called it a “back-to-basics agenda” that will effectively turn the role of enforcement of environmental safeguards over to the states. Before the Senate this past week, Pruitt defended the cuts while also promising that EPA would step up when states are unwilling to take action.



In reality, Mr. Pruitt's agency would be turning its back on

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The centerpiece of Banks Lake National Wildlife Refuge, near the Okefenokee Swamp, is the lake itself. It's a shallow blackwater lake that was formed when the Carolina Bay was dammed over 150 years ago. Credit: Craig Tanner

protecting the public from pollution in Georgia and others across the South, where state agency budgets and staff have already been slashed over the past decade.

Although the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's budget has seen meager increases from the state in the past few years, it has also become increasingly dependent on federal funding. At the same time, the EPD staff responsible for enforcement and other tasks has **decreased**

<http://wsav.com/2017/05/25/environmental-advocates-sounding-alarm-about-proposed-cuts-to-epa-and-its-effect-on-georgia/>, from 889 full-time employees in 2009 to 677 in 2016.

In Georgia, EPA provides grants for local projects that support jobs and boost the economy and steps in to lead clean-up efforts when environmental disaster strikes.

EPD gets more than 30 percent of its funding from the federal government for programs including water quality monitoring, outreach, education, and environmental restoration projects. If EPA is weakened to the breaking point, EPD will not be able

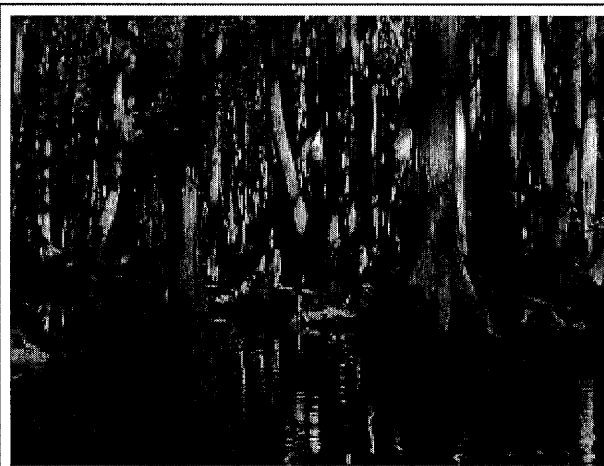
to suddenly get the state support needed to fill this significant federal funding void.

The proposed federal budget takes two hits at EPA's enforcement duties by cutting grants to states by 45 percent, while at the same time slicing 24 percent from the EPA's own budget.

Categorical grants, which help states out with enforcement among other things, are cut from \$1.079 billion to \$597 million. Environmental Programs and Management – the heart of EPA's budget – has been cut from \$2.71 billion to \$1.81 billion. EPA's budget for compliance and enforcement has been cut from \$476 million to \$313 million.

Through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund and the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, EPA provided over \$120 million in low-interest loans to Georgia last year for projects to improve water quality in rivers, streams, and lakes, and to improve facilities that supply drinking water.

While the budget proposes a \$4 million increase from the 2017 fiscal year



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The Okefenokee is much more than a swamp. It is a national wildlife refuge that provides habitats for threatened and endangered species, for amphibians, and more than 600 plant species. Credit: Chris DeScherer

continuing resolution levels for these important funds, it also eliminates a rural water and wastewater program, dismissing it as duplicative. Cutting this program eliminates millions in loans and grants to small Georgia communities for which the \$4 million increase will not compensate, leaving these communities without the assistance they need to upgrade and maintain clean water and sewer systems.

In addition to the extreme budget cuts to essential federal programs, communities across Georgia will be impacted by rollbacks to basic environmental safeguards.

Last week, the Trump administration **announced** <https://www.epa.gov/wotus-rule/pre-publication-version-proposed-rule-definition-waters-united-states->

recodification-pre] a proposal

<http://wsav.com/2017/05/25/environmental-advocates-sounding-alarm-about-proposed-cuts-to-epa-and-its-effect-on-georgia/> to repeal the Clean Water Rule as a first step in dismantling water quality protections under Clean Water Act. This move alone threatens small creeks in the north Georgia mountains, freshwater wetlands, and miles of streams in the Piedmont that feed drinking water sources

https://www.southernenvironment.org/uploads/news-feed/Map_of_Surface_Intakes_for_Drinking_Water_in_Georgia.pdf for 4.9 million Georgians.

Without adequate protections for these waters, factories, sewage treatment facilities, and industrial polluters may be able to directly dump into these waterways with impunity. This action would put important streams and wetlands at risk of pollution, threatening our drinking water supplies and outdoor recreation

<https://outdoorindustry.org/images/ore-reports/GA-georgia-outdoorrecreation-economy-oia.pdf> economies that generate \$23.3 billion in consumer spending, 231,000 jobs, \$7 billion in wages, and \$1.4 billion in state and local tax revenue in Georgia.

In short, these actions aren't slight reductions to a faceless agency or well-intentioned efforts to curb pointless regulations; they will have real effects on the ground in Georgia communities.

With so much at stake, we need the federal government to continue to serve as a crucial backstop on environmental protection. Congress must cast this backward budget aside and start over with a focus on safeguarding our communities and environment. The administration's polluter-friendly agenda will ruin the natural resources that make Georgia a desirable place to live, work, and raise families.

About the author: Gil Rogers led the SELC's water quality and water management work for the past seven years. He continues to actively work with a host of federal, state, and local partners and agencies to shape legislation, establish strong regulations, and improve individual projects.

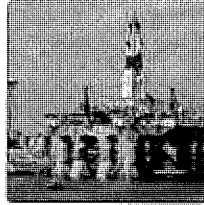
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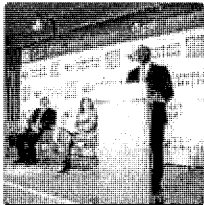
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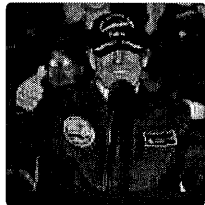
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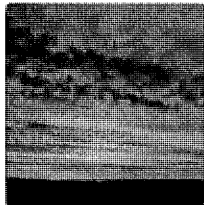
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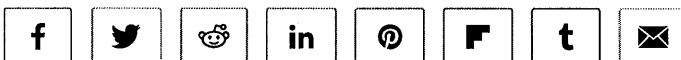
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