



Introduction: Etowah Aquatic Habitat Conservation Plan

THE ETOWAH WATERSHED



The Etowah River and its tributaries drain portions of 11 counties in north Georgia. The headwaters of the Etowah emerge from a spring in Chattahoochee National Forest in Lumpkin County. From there, the Etowah flows through Dawson, Forsyth, Cherokee, Bartow and Floyd Counties until it meets the Coosa River at the city of Rome. Along the way, tributary streams drain

portions of Pickens, Fulton, Cobb, Paulding and Polk counties as well.

The Etowah watershed has a long, rich history. Early Native Americans constructed the Etowah Indian Mounds along the banks of the river, and later the Cherokee Indians inhabited the region. After European settlement, cotton farming was practiced extensively in the southern portion of the basin. Lake Allatoona was built in 1949 and today supplies drinking water, electricity and recreation opportunities to North Georgians. Today, the Etowah watershed is experiencing rapid growth. It is an increasingly popular place for families and businesses to call home.

THE UNIQUE FISH OF THE ETOWAH

The Etowah River is also home to at least 76 native fish species, making it one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the United States. In fact, several fish found in the Etowah watershed are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else in the world. However, the long history of the Etowah has left its mark on the aquatic organisms. Fish species such as the sturgeon



Cherokee Darter

are now gone from the river, as are most of the more than 50 species of the mussels that once inhabited the watershed. The ranges of many surviving fish have been reduced by agriculture

and reservoirs. Three of these fish—the Etowah, amber and Cherokee darters—are now protected by the federal Endangered Species Act. These species are found in tributaries to the Etowah as well as in the mainstem of the river, and typically inhabit stretches of creeks and streams with rocky bottoms and clean water.

These and other sensitive species face many threats. One of the greatest is stormwater runoff from impervious surfaces—roads, parking lots and rooftops of urban and suburban areas. This runoff carries pollutants and alters the natural flows of water. In addition, erosion from construction sites ends up as sediment in the water, physically harming fishes and degrading their habitat. Dams and poorly designed culverts can prevent fish from moving. The good news is that these threats are manageable. It's possible for the threatened and endangered species of the Etowah to persist, while allowing our communities to continue to grow, develop and thrive.

THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT



The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), signed into law by President Nixon in 1972, was designed to protect species from extinction. The ESA works by prohibiting take of species. This includes direct impacts, such as hunting, harming

or collecting individuals, as well as indirect impacts, such as habitat destruction.

The ESA does include an exception, however. Individuals, businesses, and non-federal governments (such as counties and cities) can write Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) to describe how they will provide for the overall protection of a species, even though there may be some "incidental take" of individuals. If the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) approves an HCP, it grants an Incidental Take Permit to the applicant. The permit protects the applicant from punishment for incidental loss of species, as long as the plan is followed.



THE ETOWAH AQUATIC HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN



Without an HCP, developers and local governments in the Etowah basin may face long delays and added costs to comply with the ESA. That's because each potentially harmful project has to be evaluated individually by the FWS. However, a regional HCP that protects all the fish of the Etowah could greatly streamline the process. Governments that choose to participate in the HCP would adopt a set of ordinances to ensure that all development has minimal impact on the protected fish. Development projects in these cities and counties would enjoy quicker approval, because they would be complying with an existing HCP.

In 2002, the city and county governments of the Etowah watershed began working together to develop such a regional HCP. Local water authorities, members of the local building and development industry, environmental groups, the University of Georgia, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, FWS, and other stakeholders also joined the process.

Under the Etowah Aquatic HCP, each participating city and county government

will adopt a set of policies to minimize and mitigate the impacts of development activities on imperiled fish. In turn, these local governments will receive an incidental take permit from FWS that covers development activities within their jurisdictions. As long as the local governments implement the policies, and developers, builders and utilities follow them, the local governments and individual builders and developers will have protection from enforcement actions from FWS. Agricultural and forestry activities are not covered under the Etowah Aquatic HCP. The ordinances and policies include:

- Stormwater Management
- Stream Buffer Ordinance
- Erosion & Sedimentation Control
- Utility Stream Crossing Policy
- Road Stream Crossing Policy
- Water Supply Planning
- Monitoring & Adaptive Management

The Etowah Aquatic HCP will not stop or slow growth. The goal of the HCP is to ensure that development in the basin has a minimal impact on water quality and fish habitat. To reduce the regulatory burden, the ordinances are designed to simultaneously meet other environmental



requirements as well. Furthermore, many of the policies have been shown to benefit residents' quality of life and to save taxpayer money over the long run. An added benefit is that participating counties and cities will be eligible for federal land acquisition funds.

Developing and implementing a regional HCP will not be without controversy and it will not be easy. It will require a solid commitment from all participants to find solutions that are acceptable to diverse stakeholders. It will also be difficult coordinating the work and effort of all the local governments in the basin. However, the potential rewards are worth the effort. The Etowah Aquatic HCP represents an opportunity for members of the Etowah community to have it all: a healthy and thriving economy, a high quality of life, and unique aquatic ecosystem that will persist for future generations.