GEORGIA FORESTWATCH
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Post Crossover Day State Legislative Update

Crossover day in the Georgia General Assembly was last week. Crossover Day is the 28th day of the 40-day legislative period that a bill must pass the House or Senate or is theoretically dead for the year. Bills that do not cross are "**mostly dead**," but hope remains. As we are in the first year of a biennial session, any bill that did not cross this year remains active for advancement during the 2024 General Assembly. For the current session, there also remains hope (and concern) that key components of uncrossed bills find their way into bills that did cross.

Ostensibly language finding its way into crossed bills is similar to the type of bill that did cross. For example, an uncrossed transportation bill could find its way into a crossed transportation bill, but as with all legislative bodies, there is also the possibility of legal shenanigans such as "zombie bills." Zombie bills are bills that crossed but are completely gutted, and language from a bill that did not cross is inserted into the crossed bill. So, until sine die, scheduled for March 29, we must remember that the cost of democracy is eternal vigilance.

As always, GAFW is looking out for the best interests of our national forest lands and other bills that affect our state's environment. GAFW encourages you to reach out to your state legislators and voice your input on the following bills.

SB 78 – Off-Road Vehicles; civil forfeiture of any off-road vehicle operated while fleeing police or driving aggressively; authorize
Background – This bill increases penalties for the unauthorized and illegal use of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-highway vehicles (OHVs). When used in violation of the law, such as tearing up roads and trails within our national forests, this bill allows law enforcement to impound the vehicle until all fees and fines are paid. The increased penalty of having the vehicle impounded gives teeth to the current law that only allows for low-dollar tickets to be issued and the offender to drive off and continue their destructive behavior.
Status – Did not pass the Senate by Crossover Day; however, GAFW is discussing

with legislators the possibility of inserting this language into a bill that did cross.
Recommendation – Support. Contact **your Representative** and ask that this bill finds its way into an existing bill that crossed.

HB 71 – Okefenokee Protection Act; enact
Background –This bill prevents future attempts to undermine this extraordinary and uncommon national treasure by prohibiting future mining permits on a vulnerable sand ridge that forms the Eastern boundary of the Okefenokee Swamp.
Status – Did not pass the House by Crossover Day but is tentatively scheduled for a committee hearing later today to discuss **HR 438** to create a study committee.
Recommendation – Support. Contact **your Representative** and **Committee Chair Representative, Lynn Smith**, to express your concerns at this bill not passing out of the **House Committee on Natural Resources & Environment** and ask them to prioritize passage of this bill in the 2024 General Assembly.

HB 477 – Agriculture; require certain notices for the application of soil amendments to land with certain requirements
Background – If you live anywhere in rural, or even exurban, Georgia, you may notice the lingering stench coming off agricultural fields during part of the year. This is due to untreated industrial waste from chicken production (eggs, chicks, birds, & meat packing facilities) and other animal by-products, such as pet food refuse, being dumped on fields as a "soil amendment." Allowing untreated animal waste to be spread across our landside without regulation creates odors, swarms of flies and vultures, and ecological disaster in neighboring and downstream waterways from runoff (ask the growing number of people who refuse to swim in Lake Lanier anymore). This bill will create a public database of all "soil amendments" spread on fields, allow local governments to investigate the source of this pollution, and enforce existing rules.
Status – Blocked by **Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper**, this bill did not pass the House by Crossover Day and is unlikely to be taken up again this year in any form.
Recommendation – Support. Contact **your Representative** and **Committee Chair Representative, Lynn Smith**, to express your concerns about this bill not passing out of the **House Committee on Natural Resources & Environment** and ask them to prioritize the passage of this bill in the 2024 General Assembly. If you have examples of how this concern directly affects you, please use them in your communications to strengthen your case. You can also use the **action alert from Protect GA**.

HB 189 – Highways, bridges, and ferries; allowable variance for weight limitations upon a vehicle or load; provide for
Background –The only thing worse than having to back down a mountain road due to an oncoming logging truck bearing down on you is an even heavier logging truck bearing down on you while you try to find a pullout. This bill would, unfortunately, raise weight limits from 80,000 pounds to 90,000 pounds for all five-axle big rigs. The weight restriction on federal roads and bridges is set at 80,000 pounds, meaning that our heaviest trucks will be forced onto state and local surface roads, creating safety concerns and increased wear. If you are already dealing with poorly maintained roads and deferred maintenance on bridges in your county, this will dramatically increase the number of potholes without providing any additional taxes from truckers to repair the damage to your streets.
Status – Passed the House to the Senate late on Crossover Day. **See how your Representative voted here**. Currently assigned to the **Senate Transportation Committee**.

Recommendation – Oppose. Contact **your Senator** and **Committee Chair, Senator Greg Dolezal**, to share your opposition to this bill. You should also reach out to your local city and county officials, letting them know you oppose this bill and asking them to contact state legislators.

Welcome Jessica Morehead, Outreach Coordinator

GAFW is excited to announce that Jessica Morehead has joined us as the new Outreach Coordinator.

Jessica grew up in the Atlanta area and spent most of her childhood visiting her grandparents outside of Cleveland, playing in the foothills of the Chattahoochee National Forest with family. Eventually, she grew up, and her grandparents sold the property. Years would pass before a spontaneous desert road trip would remind her of her love for the outdoors and return her to the north Georgia forests.

After working as an educator for five years at the Atlanta International School, Jessica pursued a career in land conservation and the outdoors. She volunteered with organizations like Park Pride and the Georgia Conservancy and began leading stewardship hikes in 2015. She started working for the Georgia Chapter of Sierra Club a year later. Jessica worked alongside Georgia ForestWatch and Southern Environmental Law Center representing Sierra Club in the Foothills Landscape Collaboration. She also led monthly trail maintenance days with the Forest Service. More recently, she served three years as the Georgia Chapter Director for Sierra Club.

In her free time, you can find her dancing, playing the piano, rock climbing, or hitting the trails with her labrador retriever, Aspen McGregor. Jessica is excited to join the team at Georgia Forestwatch and help in efforts to grow the organization. She's thrilled to once again be in a position to spend time with folks in the outdoors and invites all of you to join her. Please reach out to her directly at **outreach@gafw.org** if you'd like to get involved.

Donate to GAFW Today

Thank You Sapelo Foundation!

We're proud to announce that we recently received $25,000 from the **Sapelo Foundation**. This is the second half of a two-year grant awarding $50,000 total to GAFW between 2022 and 2023.

We're grateful to the Sapelo Foundation for their longstanding support of GAFW and our work protecting the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Upcoming GAFW Outings

Wednesday, April 5 - Tour the Chattahoochee Forest National Fish Hatchery , Suches, GA. 10:00 am.

Saturday, April 8 - Private Hike & Tour - **Lula Lake Land Trust with Debbie**, Lookout Mountain, GA. 11:00 am.

Thursday, April 27 - **Keown Falls & Johns Mountain with Bill & Leslie,** NW GA, near Resaca, GA. 10:00 am.

Saturday, May 6 - **Cooper's Creek-Old Growth "Valley of the Giants" with Melanie & Cliff**, 10:00 am.

Saturday, October 14 - Save the Date! GAFW Annual Retreat at Red Top Mountain.

Interested in leading a hike or other outing for GAFW? We are searching for additional leaders who are willing to share their favorite parts of the forest. Let us know at **outreach@gafw.org**.

GAFW Outings on Meetup

If this email was forwarded to you, **please register here** to receive GAFW updates.

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Thank You

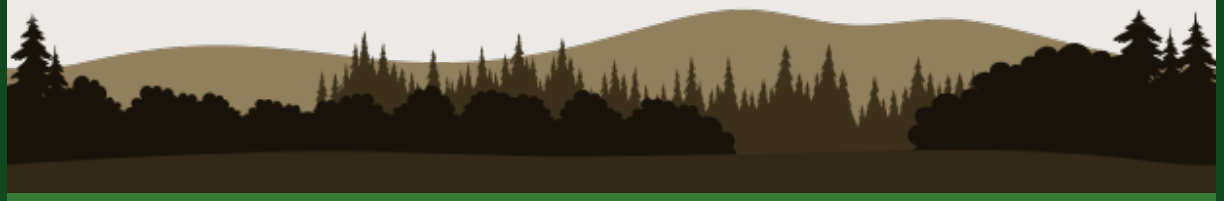
Georgia ForestWatch is the only nonprofit organization with a mission solely dedicated to ensuring the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests remain healthy and available for future generations, and we can only pursue our mission with the support of the community.

Please support our mission by ensuring your **membership is up to date** and providing **additional support** as you are able.

On behalf of our entire national forests in our beautiful state, we thank you for your support.

Our Mission

Our mission is to enhance the health of over 867,000 acres of Georgia's national forest by protecting our forests and streams, advocating for natural processes, and identifying opportunities to improve forest management. Visit **Georgia ForestWatch** (GAFW) to learn more.



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