



2016 Summary of Issues for Coastal Georgia

1. Coal Ash

Coal ash has been a dangerously hidden issue until recently, after several impoundment ponds spilled this toxic waste product into rivers and wetlands. In spite of its concentrated cancer-causing toxins, EPA has, at least temporarily, allowed coal ash to be deposited in plastic-lined municipal landfills. One of these landfills, at “Broadhurst,” is near the Altamaha River in Wayne County. As part of our general effort to safeguard public health and to prevent contamination of sensitive and vitally important wetlands, rivers, groundwater, and wildlife habitat, the Center is administering a Coal Ash Legal Fund. The fund will help oppose a rail-transfer facility permit that would enable some 10,000 tons of toxic coal ash to be imported to the landfill daily. Improved state and federal regulations are urgently needed to upgrade safeguards. See our “Five Ways to Improve Control of Coal Ash.”

2. Climate Change & Clean Energy

To prevent the worst consequences of an overheating climate, emission of “greenhouse gases” (GHGs) must be reduced as much as possible, as soon as possible. Under current trends, various global factors will accelerate sea-level rise, flooding, drought, damage to marine ecosystems, wildfires, and disease. Unless remedial actions are greatly expanded, all coastal regions will suffer even more than other areas. A major part of corrective action is to significantly cut the use of fossil fuels while stepping up ongoing efforts to replace them with clean energy sources that don’t release GHGs. Though the price of solar power sources has plummeted and the installation of solar equipment has ramped up in recent years, the U.S. still only provides some 15% of its total energy needs from such clean sources, compared with more than half (nearly 4 times as much) in other economically advanced nations. We will be partnering with other groups nationally to boost clean-energy incentives, curtail fossil-fuel development, and reform U.S. energy policy to be consistent with vitally important commitments to addressing climate change.

3. Accountability and Transparency of Environmental Regulation

Not only do environmental regulations need to be improved, but those that exist must be more uniformly enforced and public agencies must be held accountable. Repeatedly, we have witnessed the failure of advisory, planning, and regulatory institutions to meet their obligation under the law. Regulatory authorities that are delegated to lower levels of government are inadequately monitored, pivotal development issues are ignored or marginalized, and public comments for improving rules and practices are routinely ignored by public officials. In effect, the exploitation and private use of publicly-owned natural resources is often dominated by political influence instead of objective application of the law. Likewise, too little is known about the conditions and trends of our environment, as troubling indicators such as fish-kills and toxically contaminated marine mammals, are inadequately and belatedly evaluated. Research about resource conditions and trends must be responsibly used in decision-making.

4. Coastal Development, Quality of Life, and Resource Degradation

As development continues, aggregating quantitative factors such as population and vehicle registrations produce a reduction in quality of life and destabilized ecosystem performance. Official analysis of development proposals is too often restricted to fragmented, site-specific factors that fail to account for the cumulative degradation caused by increasing urbanization, excessive land-clearing (de-vegetation), and reckless speculation. Local land-use controls must be consistently enforced and they also need to be guided by precautionary evaluation of longer-term impacts. When circumstances justify it, land must be acquired for environmental conservation instead of being developed. The Center will continue to advise public officials, comment at public meetings, and voice informed opinions in the media as part of ongoing efforts to strengthen public awareness about – and involvement in – these critical issues.