

# SPRING CREEK WATERSHED PARTNERSHIP IN SOUTHWEST GEORGIA

Sandy Abbott

---

*AUTHOR:* Fish and Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. P.O. Box 52560 Ft. Benning, Georgia 31995

*REFERENCE:* *Proceedings of the 2005 Georgia Water Resources Conference*, held April 25-27, 2005, at the University of Georgia. Kathryn J. Hatcher, editor, Institute Ecology, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

---

**Abstract.** The Spring Creek Watershed Partnership (SCWP) was created due to growing concerns of long time residents in Miller County about the ever increasing degradation of Spring Creek. Invitations to participate in the partnership were extended to the other five counties that are part of the Spring Creek watershed. All six counties, along with federal, state, and local agencies, signed the agreement forming the partnership in October 2003. The purpose of the partnership is to provide leadership and promote wise stewardship through community development, educational outreach, and the active participation of private landowners, for enhancing, restoring, and protecting the Spring Creek Watershed. The partnership is in the process of taking inventory of impacts to Spring Creek such as unpaved road sediment input, agricultural land erosion and run off, streambank failure from erosion, channel instability, live stock access, agricultural irrigation, and pathogens that could or have had negative impacts to aquatic fauna. The partnership's goal is to address these impacts through federal and state agency programs. Through this partnership all entities involved hope to improve the overall water quality of the Spring Creek Watershed which will in turn protect the rich and unique aquatic fauna that occurs in this system.

## INTRODUCTION

The Spring Creek Watershed covers 530,000 acres of land in Southwest Georgia and is one of the few remaining free flowing creeks. The headwaters of Spring Creek originate from natural springs in Clay, Calhoun, and Early Counties. Spring Creek continues its journey through Miller, Decatur, and Seminole Counties where it empties into Lake Seminole. The watershed is part of the larger Flint River System and sits on top of the Floridian/Jacksonian Aquifer and the Claiborne Aquifer systems.

Many people depend on the natural resources surrounding Spring Creek for drinking water, hunting, fishing, agriculture (i.e., irrigation, livestock, and crops), waste removal, and transportation. These resources are extremely valuable for the local economy and

employment opportunities. Because of the growing concern by many local entities that Spring Creek is being adversely impacted, restoration and protection issues needed to be addressed. Spring Creek has been identified as an impaired waterbody under Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act. This designation was identified because Aycocks Creek has high concentrations of fecal coliform, and Spring Creek has low dissolved oxygen and high sediment loads. The Partnership can bring together all entities interested in recovering and cleaning up Spring Creek with a coordinated management plan for water quality and fish and wildlife protection.

## THE PARTNERSHIP

On October 8, 2003, The Spring Creek Watershed Partnership was established through the signing of a Conservation Stewardship Agreement. Parties which signed this agreement to form the partnership included the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development Council, Inc., Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Clay, Early, Calhoun, Miller, Decatur, and Seminole Counties. This partnership was developed to facilitate conservation action and environmental outreach for natural environments surrounding areas of Spring Creek in southwest Georgia. The Parties agree to collectively participate in the restoration and enhancement of upland and water-related projects throughout the six counties in southwest Georgia as well as coordinate and manage activities within the Spring Creek watershed. Each party that signed the agreement is expected to play a specific key role in the development and success of the partnership. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Golden Triangle Resource Conservation and Development Council possess the required technical expertise and the ability to deliver critical area assessment, design, and treatment; and the responsibility to deliver such expertise for the general benefit of environmental resources. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has particular expertise in providing technical assistance for project implementation including pre- and post-monitoring of aquatic resources and physical habitat, design criteria and conceptual drawings,

field construction methods, funding opportunities, and outreach needs. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also provides coordination for the SCWP, including assistance with the development of a management plan, securing funding opportunities, collaborating with landowners, and conducting site-specific scientific data collection. The Counties provide local authority closest to the people and increase the capacity to effectively serve the citizens of each county through legislative action, education of public officials, and enhancement of public awareness about the role and functions of county government.

The Parties agreed to develop and implement voluntary and cooperative stewardship agreements for specific on-the-ground projects and the conservation and management of protected species. Particularly, projects will focus on promoting stream restoration and protection for threatened and endangered mussel species (e.g., shinyrayed pocketbook and oval pigtoe) and several imperiled fish and mussel species (e.g., spotted bullhead and bluestripe shiner). Additional projects will involve the conservation and/or restoration of native longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystems historic to the Coastal Plain. Species that would benefit from this type of habitat restoration may include the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), threatened Eastern Indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*), state-listed gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), and multiple imperiled plant species. Other native habitat conservation will include wetland and natural springs restoration and enhancement.

The partnership is intended to address widespread, intractable non-point source pollution problems resulting from unpaved roads and associated stream crossings. Implementing a program to address stabilizing unpaved roads through cooperative and innovative partnerships will facilitate an effective working relationship between state, federal, and local agencies; identify priority restoration needs throughout the Spring Creek watershed; develop a set of practical tools and methods useful for local government and agency road maintenance departments; and implement a series of demonstration projects that would validate methods, reduce sediment loading, protect and restore aquatic habitats, and promote awareness on the part of citizens and local governments.

#### THE PARTNERSHIPS PROGRESS A YEAR LATER

The Partnership has been moving at a steady rate toward accomplishing goals set forth in the conservation agreement signed in October of 2003.

The first project taken on and completed by the partnership was to restore the flow to one of the major springs flowing into Spring Creek. Thousands of yards of sediment were removed from Laurel Bush Springs and disposed of. Locals are now reporting a significant increase in flow and clarity from this springhead source. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program along with Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission have been working with private landowners in the Spring Creek Watershed to promote fencing to keep cattle out of the creek and streambank restoration. To date approximately 800 feet of streambank is in progress of being restored and approximately 11,600 feet of stream is now protected from cattle. These projects will help prevent introduction of excess sediment as well as fecal coliform. A freshwater mussel survey was conducted by the Partnership's technical committee in August of 2004 to assess the status of mussel populations in Spring Creek. The surveyors focused their efforts in Miller County surveying approximately one mile of stream. This survey showed a significant decrease in once abundant mussel populations in Spring Creek. Spring Creek was depleted of water throughout extensive portions of the creek during the summer of 2000. This is believed to have heavily contributed to the recent mussel population decline. This current survey information will be used to assess the recovery or continued decline of mussel populations in Spring Creek.

Two projects that will start soon include an unpaved road inventory and Adopt-A-Stream monitoring locations throughout the watershed. Unpaved roads are known sources of excessive sediment introduction into Spring Creek. To assess these locations for possible restoration efforts an inventory of all unpaved road stream crossings will need to be conducted. A graduate student from Columbus State University has agreed to tie this inventory project within his thesis and will soon begin the inventorying process. This information will aid the Partnership in prioritizing the severity of the unpaved road stream crossings and where restoration efforts would benefit Spring Creek the most.

The Partnership is currently soliciting help from teachers within the Spring Creek Watershed to aid in collecting valuable water quality data using the Adopt-A-Stream program. This will promote greater community involvement while monitoring water quality in Spring Creek. Through the continuing efforts of all parties involved in this Partnership, Spring Creek will once again be a healthy aquatic system for generations to come.

