

FORESTED WETLAND CONSERVATION ON THE COASTAL PLAIN IN GEORGIA

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As a result of federal, state and private efforts, 17.8% of all forested wetlands in Georgia's Atlantic Coastal Plain are in some form of conservation management – 56% as public land and 28% as private land under conservation easement. These impressive sums represent the dedicated efforts of many individuals, organizations, and agencies, yet it is striking that most of the conserved land is public and that only 7.8% of private lands enjoy some measure of protection. In the absence of a continued, but vastly increased land acquisition campaign, most forested wetlands will remain in private hands. An imperative, therefore, is to promote the management of these lands for important environmental benefits including critical wildlife habitat, flood protection, removal of nutrients and pollution from urban and agricultural runoff, water storage that moderates droughts, and carbon sequestration. Importantly, 476,000 acres of forest in the 11 coastal counties are enrolled in either FLPA or CUVA, which require lands to be maintained in forest production – indicating the potential of incentive programs. And yet, within the 38 counties making up Georgia's Atlantic Coastal Plain, zero acres are enrolled under the Environmentally Sensitive category of CUVA/FLPA that requires maintaining land in a natural condition. A key conclusion, therefore, is that the current range of programs available to landowners, as well as existing incentive structures and outreach associated with these programs are clearly not engaging private landowners to conserve mature wetland forests to a degree that protects the valuable portfolio of ecosystem services they provide. As a first step toward developing policy tools that can shift the management of forested wetlands by private landowners toward conservation, we present a series of maps summarizing the extent, condition, and conservation status of forested wetlands on Georgia's Coastal Plain.

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