SAVANNAH RIVER CUTOFF RESTORATION TASK FORCE

History: Death by a Thousand Cuts

From long before colonization through the Industrial Revolution, the Savannah River was a highway for shipping connecting the Appalachian mountains to the Atlantic. But commerce slowed during the Great Depression. As part of nationwide efforts to optimize rivers for commercial use, the Corps of Engineers began straightening the river between Augusta and Savannah, GA to burgeon once-active barge traffic. By cutting off natural bends (hence the term "cutoff bends"), and removing sandbars, snags, and other obstacles the Corps displaced at least 40 miles of distance between the two cities. When the U.S. entered into WWII, commercial shipping slowed, barges were confiscated for war efforts and the channel fell into disuse. Shipping ceased completely by 1979, but the detriment left behind to ecosystems, entire species, and the river itself went unaddressed for almost 50 years.

Reaping the Benefits of Restoration

Today, the Savannah River is a source for municipal and industrial users, a vehicle for waste disposal, and a force for power generation. It supplies water to the nuclear processing facility Savannah River Site, two electricity-generating nuclear reactors at Plant Vogtle, and dozens of chemical plants and other facilities that discharge waste, "boasting" the third-highest number of toxic releases from its 48 municipal and industrial outfalls. In the Savannah Harbor, the nation's fourth-largest seaport for oceangoing container ships, the riverbed is currently being dredged from 43 to 47 feet.

After several decades of this use and abuse, dissolved oxygen levels have become a concern largely because of large amounts of discharged industrial and municipal waste exacerbated by water needs in upstream lakes, and negative affects of ongoing and previous harbor deepenings. In response, the Army Corps of Engineers and other partners are pursuing one of the largest river restoration projects in U.S. history: to restore the oxbows which were straightened for barge traffic, potentially adding an estimated 30-40 miles of flowing water and wetland systems back into the overburdened river. *Assimilative capacity* refers to the river's ability to naturally flush and filter contaminants, a capacity that increases when more water is available. Swamps and wetlands serve as the liver and kidneys of a river system. While the old adage "the solution to pollution is dilution," doesn't always apply, an increase in flow for the Savannah River would be a huge step towards reducing its heavy pollutant burden.

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The Kissimmee River in FL is currently undergoing similar restoration.

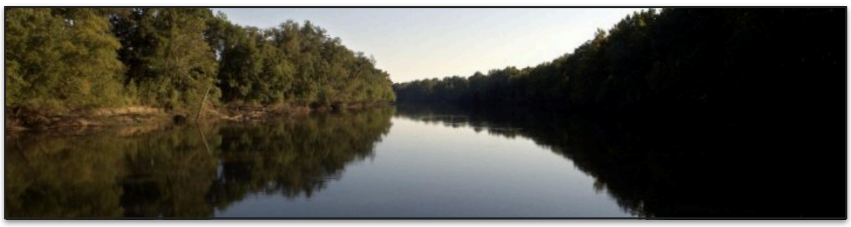
Unearthing the River's Future

A long-term yet critical project, the reintroduction of natural river bends is expected to offer enormous benefits to the Savannah River. We are part of a large and growing consortium who recognize the importance of allowing the river to heal itself.

In 2016, Savannah Riverkeeper became the non-federal sponsor of the "Savannah River Below Augusta Restoration Feasibility Study." Slated for completion by 2019, it will provide the blueprint for embarking on this massive project. It has taken wide-reaching cooperation to reach this point. Savannah Riverkeeper is actively working with partners including agencies both federal and state from Georgia and South Carolina, local municipalities like City of Augusta Utilities, Georgia Ports Authority, non-governmental organizations and for-profit businesses. We will serve in a leadership role on the restoration board, guiding those involved to begin work on the oxbow reintroduction plan.

A total $13.5 million has been dedicated to this project through the Savannah Harbor Settlement Agreement but the release of those funds will not occur for a number of years. The feasibility study is underway, but **a cost of $1.5 million in matching non-federal funds will have to be compiled through state and local agencies and non-governmental organizations.** Timing for the completion of that study is crucial. We are actively seeking partnership opportunities to raise the needed funds.

As the effects of industry, development, drought, saltwater intrusion, and more bear down on us, our reliance on the Savannah River for drinking water, sustenance and recreation is only increasing. We must give the Savannah River a fighting chance, and not only for its own sake—our communities, economies and ecosystems depend on it.



Giving the Savannah a Fighting Chance

Restoring the river will offer:

1. **A smart use of funds.** Savannah Harbor Expansion Project (SHEP) mitigation agreements set aside **$12.5 million for restoration**, paving the way for this project to begin. Used elsewhere, these funds would be less effective.
2. **A way to cleaner water.** The longer a river flows, the cleaner it becomes. Restoring the bends will not only slow down the water, allowing more time for good bacteria to clean it, but also reconnect lost wetlands, the liver and kidneys of a river system.
3. **Bonus flood protection.** Wetlands increase a river's resilience to floods, which keeps people and property out of harm's way, and reduces the burden of taxpayers and emergency responders as climate-related flood events become more common.
4. **A robust wildlife corridor.** Restoration of bends, swamps and tributaries supports crucial spawning grounds, nurseries and rookieries for fish, reptiles, amphibians and birds to reproduce and raise young.
5. **Community & connectivity.** Opportunities to develop new, ecologically intuitive mechanisms such as natural and rock-lined shallow water habitats along the river could boost local economies and quality of life through ecotourism and increased recreation.

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