



## Fast Facts

In 2001, the DNR Board adopted an “Interim Instream Flow Protection Policy” until more specific studies could be undertaken. Those studies have yet to be conducted.

Flow alterations have destroyed, compromised, or threatened a wide range of ecosystem services including commercial and sport fisheries, flood attenuation, groundwater recharge, wildlife habitat, pollution dilution, timber production, crop production, soil productivity (moisture-content and nutrient availability), recreation, and aesthetics.

The invasion and success of exotic and introduced species in rivers is facilitated by the alteration of flow regimes.

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# Protect Instream Flows

## What’s at Stake?

In Georgia, we are blessed with abundant water resources and a myriad of native aquatic species. But rising pressures to develop land and imprudent water use are threatening our precious water resources. Rivers in Georgia are under intense pressure to provide many different services to Georgians, such as drinking water supply, boating, wastewater treatment, agricultural irrigation, recreation, hydropower and industrial uses.

In order to accommodate all of these competing uses and continue to maintain an ecosystem which is not degraded to the point of collapse, we must adopt a balanced approach to protect our ecological infrastructure and ensure that enough water remains in our rivers and streams. Without enough clean water in an aquatic system, a river can no longer provide a reliable supply of water for human consumption. Instream flow, or simply the amount of water flowing in a river or stream at a given time, is a key to the health and viability of rivers and streams throughout the state. Instream flows are reduced by dams and municipal and industrial withdrawals. Flows are further decreased by ‘hardening’ of the landscape due to ditching, draining, channelization, and ‘impervious surfaces’ (rooftops, driveways, roads, parking lots, et cetera).

## Challenges

Reduced stream flows can result in many negative impacts, including loss of fish and wildlife, increased erosion and sedimentation, and increased concentration of pollution, as well as the loss of river recreation. Reduced flow also magnifies the problem of stormwater runoff – caused by poorly planned development and increased impervious surfaces – by reducing a river’s capacity to dilute the pollution contained in the runoff. In addition, reduced flow can also diminish the availability of clean drinking water and destroys aquatic habitat. A statewide one-size-fits-all instream flow volume will not work because such an approach “flatlines” the natural flow variability of a river and reduces it to a low, constant drought flow.

## Next Steps

Ideally, instream flow regimes would be determined by very focused, scientific, sub-basin studies to evaluate aquatic habitat and water demands specific to each location. With the implementation of the statewide water plan, now is the time for Georgia to shift from simply setting minimum flow volumes to determining instream flow regimes that address how much water can safely be removed while sustaining the function and services of our rivers.

- Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) should take the opportunity to develop these basin-specific flow regimes during the resource assessment phase of the statewide water plan.
- EPD should implement a true adaptive management program which evaluates maximum withdrawals and accounts for variable flows. EPD should invite an independent scientific review committee to ensure the best models are being utilized and that they are being applied in a sound manner and based on the best available data.
- EPD should utilize instream flows as a yardstick against which permitting and/or planning decisions regarding water withdrawals, types of development, and restoration strategies, either surface or groundwater, can be made.