

Published Saturday, May 19, 2012

Chattahoochee "endangered river?" Planned water reservoirs seen as hazard by national group

BY SARAH FAY CAMPBELL

sarah@newnan.com

A national organization has named the Chattahoochee River the third most endangered river in the United States.

But it's not because of pollution, development, or drought.

Instead, American Rivers considers the Chattahoochee endangered because of plans to build two reservoirs near the river. One, Glades, is a proposed 850-acre reservoir in Hall County.

The other, Bear Creek, is a 440-acre lake in Chattahoochee Hills and would be a project of the South Fulton Municipal Water and Sewer Authority, which is made up of Palmetto, Fairburn, and Union City.

Both reservoirs will be on tributaries of the Chattahoochee. The plans for both include the use of some water pumped from the Chattahoochee. The Bear Creek reservoir, its second phase, would pump water from the Chattahoochee into Bear Creek, below the dam, to ensure adequate stream flows. In the third phase, pumped water would also be used to help keep the lake full.

Both reservoirs are in the planning stages, and have been for years.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is currently doing an environmental impact study on the Glades Reservoir.

The Bear Creek project isn't as far along, yet.

"It's very early in the process," Kevin Chambers, spokesman for the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, said about both projects.

"Our concern, of course, when we're considering permit applications for these types of projects is that they not have a negative impact," Chambers said. "That is why the environmental impact study is being done," he said. "It is very early in the process to try to comment on it."

The press release from American Rivers calls Glades and Bear Creek "two boondoggle dam and reservoir proposals that are far too expensive and would harm water supplies, clean water, recreation opportunities, and fish and wildlife habitat."

Other rivers on the top 10 list are threatened by mountaintop removal coal mining, pollution from natural gas "fracking," damming of the rivers for reservoirs, dredging, and outdated flood management programs.

Yet the Chattahoochee ranked higher on the list than those rivers.

Jenny Hoffner, water supply director for American Rivers and a Georgia resident, was asked why the threat from two highly-regulated reservoirs merited such a high ranking on the list.

"I think each river, for the people who are in that areaâ | that is probably the number one threat for them," she said.

But water supply reservoirs are "something that is threatening a lot of rivers. So the Chattahoochee is really at a tipping point," she said. "The whole ACF (Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint) system is at a tipping point," she said.

"We have regulated it, we've damed it. If we were to go ahead and build these two dams, especially when we have so many other options at our disposal that are cheaper, faster, and more reliableâ |"

And those options, said Hoffner, are conservation and efficiency.

Plus, she said, the entities planning to build the reservoirs don't really need them right now.

Union City and Fairburn currently buy their water from the city of Atlanta. Palmetto has its own water system.

Hall County doesn't have its own water system, said Hoffner. Instead, Hall partners with the city of Gainesville. And Gainesville "has gone on record to say they are not interested in investing in this reservoir," she said. "It is unclear to us who that reservoir is actually serving."

Hoffner was asked to explain just how the two reservoirs would "harm water supplies, clean water, recreation opportunities and fish and wildlife habitat."

Though neither reservoir will actually be on the Chattahoochee, "we are still damming a river," Hoffner said. "There are issues related to that in the whole basin. You're changing the whole system," she said. "You're evaporating water from the system that nobody is going to be able to use," she said.

For the main stem of the Chattahoochee, "the threat is that you are reducing flows on a river that already has challenges, obviously, with sustaining enough flow to supply all of the river's demands."

Hoffner said her organization's position is that reservoirs "should be a solution of last resort."

For one thing, reservoirs can be incredibly expensive and "in truth we don't really need the water," she said.

There are examples of water systems that have "squeezed the last drop out of their water system by encouraging efficiency," Hoffner said. "That is a much cheaper form of water supply, and it is water supply that is already available. It is not contested," she said.

In the past several years, the state of Georgia has implemented some fairly stringent water conservation rules.

But those aren't investments in efficiency, Hoffner said.

"Most communities, for the most part, haven't invested in conservation and efficiency as a source of water supply," she said. Instead, conservation is just seen as a "good thing to do."

In the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District, roughly 16 percent of all water is considered "non revenue water," that is lost through leaks, according to Hoffner.

"Couldn't we first go after that water, at a fraction of the cost?" she asked.

But can conservation and efficiency actually provide enough water to meet future supply needs?

Hoffner said that the city of Seattle just completed a 10-year program that reduced water use by one percent each year. "They were successful in doing that," she said. "They were able to provide for population growth and in doing so, they managed to secure their water supplies for the next 60 years," she said.

In the main list, American Rivers alleges that the Glades and Bear Creek reservoirs threaten "clean water and healthy fisheries."

On the organization's website, American Rivers goes so far as to say that "new dams and reservoirs threaten to dry up the river flow."

That's despite the fact that there are significant federal and state permitting procedures and regulations that require certain minimum stream flows and forbid pumping at times of low flow.

"There is a list of requirements that have to be met when you are considering a permit application," said Chambers with the EPD. "That can include such things as impact on downstream users, and requiring a water conservation plan be in place," he said.

- [About us](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [Social News Forms](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Visitor Agreement](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [Mobile](#)
- [Go To Top](#)