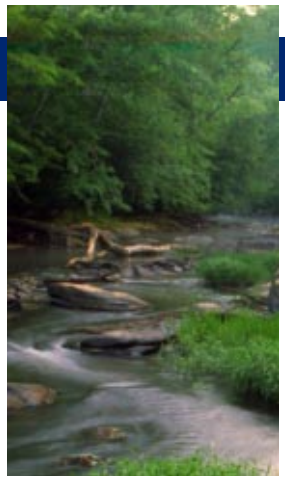

BETH MAYNOR YOUNG

ALABAMA, GEORGIA

TALLAPOOSA RIVER

THREAT: HYDROPOWER AND WATER SUPPLY DAMS, OVERALLOCATION

SUMMARY

Although Alabama Power Company's R.L. Harris dam already has transformed a section of the Tallapoosa River into an ecological desert, more dams could be on the way as the sprawling Atlanta metro area seeks to develop municipal water supplies in the river's pristine headwaters. Unless Alabama Power reforms abusive hydropower operations and Georgia and Alabama take up the call to use their water more efficiently, the river's unparalleled assortment of aquatic wildlife is at risk.

THE RIVER

The Tallapoosa River has its origins as a collection of streams that drains the southern Appalachian mountains in Georgia before braiding together to form the river's mainstem southwest of Atlanta. These upper reaches of the Tallapoosa River basin are a true freshwater wonderland and among the most biologically rich in the world. The streams boast a remarkable collection of aquatic wildlife, particularly salamanders, freshwater mussels, and small, colorful fish known as darters.

D. DUNN, US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

After crossing the Alabama border, the river winds south and west, passing through a series of hydropower dams before joining with the Coosa River near Montgomery. Here, the river has been subdued, and is now a workhorse for the Alabama Power Company.

THE RISK

R.L. Harris Dam, built and operated by Alabama Power Company (APC), is arguably the most ecologically abusive hydroelectric project in the nation. Since its construction in 1980, this facility has turned a 47-mile stretch of the Tallapoosa River on and off like a faucet, subjecting the river and downstream communities to increases in river flow from as low as zero to as great as 16,000 cubic feet per second — as much water as 24,000 firehoses — in just minutes.

During periods of low consumer demand for electricity, water levels below Harris Dam drop to the point where the river is no more than a collection of rocky pools. Parents are ill-advised to let their children hunt for crayfish in these puddles — when APC can charge top dollar for each kilowatt, it opens the gates and unleashes a torrent. According to local residents, the roar of the approaching river resembles that of an oncoming train, so loud that it can be heard for several minutes before the water actually arrives.

This daily back and forth between flood and drought has devastated the river's populations of fish and wildlife and continues to eat away at landowners' property along the river below the dam. In the dry language of regulation, Alabama state officials designated this reach of the Tallapoosa River as "impaired" in 2000. Others have more bluntly called the river below R.L. Harris an "ecological desert."

Upriver, the Tallapoosa is threatened by a different kind of dam. The Tallapoosa's headwaters are within reach of the sprawling Atlanta metropolitan area, and Georgia officials are now pushing to build a new water supply dam on a small tributary. The West Georgia Project would pump water out of the Tallapoosa River into the tributary reservoir, which could then be piped to Atlanta. Not only would the project flood out a freshwater ecological wonder, it also would badly deplete water levels in the Tallapoosa by channeling return flows into another river basin.

D. DUNN, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

TOP: ATLANTA WANTS TO DROWN SOME OF THE TALLAPOOSA'S BIOLOGICALLY-RICH HEADWATER STREAMS UNDER A MUNICIPAL RESERVOIR.



THREE PHOTOS, AMY LEWIS SIDES

What can be done in the next 12 months

The abusive operations of the R.L. Harris Dam violate the terms of the operating license issued to Alabama Power Company by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). Other harmful consequences of the dam's operations were not foreseen when the license was issued. After four years of negotiation with governmental agencies, lake groups, and river conservation interests, APC has yet to commit to improved operations. A coalition has set a deadline for the success of these negotiations as July 4, after which time, they will formally petition FERC to enforce the current license requirements and rewrite other license provisions.

BETH MAYNOR YOUNG

By reconsidering the license terms, FERC would provide the public with a formal opportunity to speak up for the river, and enable state and federal resource agencies to require modifications to these drastic operations in the event that negotiations fail. Negotiation or FERC intervention are the only opportunities to restore more natural flows to the river and ensure that the Tallapoosa downstream of R.L. Harris Dam meets state water quality standards until 2030, when APC's current license expires.

The fate of the West Georgia Project is intertwined in the outcome of trilateral negotiations between the states of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. These states are facing a deadline to propose a new formula for water allocation in two shared river basins, including the Tallapoosa, by June 30, 2003, followed by a 60-day period for public comment. The states should commit to preserving appropriate flows in their shared river basins, and exhausting opportunities for water conservation and efficiency, before allowing the development of new water supplies such as the West Georgia Reservoir.

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Alabama Power Company's R.L. Harris Dam on the middle Tallapoosa is one of the most ecologically abusive in the nation, alternately flooding and drying up the river downstream.

For more information or to take action: www.americanrivers.org/mostendangered/tallapoosa2003.htm