



# Tool for Recovery

## The Draft Aquatic Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan

### The Etowah River Basin

The Etowah River and its tributaries drain portions of 11 counties in north Georgia. Over the last decade, these counties have undergone significant growth. The rapid increase in development has many citizens and their local governments worried about water quality and aquatic habitat in the watershed.

The Etowah River is home to at least 76 native fish species, making it one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the United States. In fact, several fish found in the Etowah watershed are found nowhere else in the world. Three of these fish—the Etowah, amber and Cherokee darters—are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).



photo: University of Georgia

Stream buffers

The good news is that these threats are manageable. It is possible for the threatened and endangered species of the Etowah to persist, while allowing communities to continue to grow, develop and thrive.

### The Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)

In 2002, local governments of the Etowah watershed began working together with universities, resources agencies, and the development industry to write a regional HCP. The Etowah HCP is a voluntary program that would authorize participating jurisdictions to impact small numbers of listed fish if they adopt ordinances and policies to minimize the impact of development activities on listed fish and their habitat. The ordinances and policies include:

- Stormwater Management
- Stream Buffers
- Utility Crossings
- Road Crossings
- Erosion and Sedimentation
- Water Supply Planning
- Adaptive Management

The FWS currently reviews actions that could potentially impact listed species and makes recommendations very similar to guidelines proposed in the draft HCP. Because of growth in the area, the FWS is unable to consult on all activities, leaving many projects vulnerable to prosecution. The HCP will provide a tool for achieving species conservation while protecting developers from ESA violations, reducing federal involvement, and promoting community responsibility by delegating control to local governments.

### Status

On December 21, 2006, nine of the local governments in the Etowah basin submitted a draft HCP to the FWS for review. FWS must now determine if the plan will provide the necessary protection to the three fish species as required under the ESA. If FWS determines the plan should proceed, then the Etowah HCP will be posted in the Federal Register for public review. Through this process, the FWS will address concerns of the environmental community, development industry, and other affected parties before incidental take permits are issued to the local governments. For further information about the Etowah HCP please visit the website: [www.etowahhcp.org](http://www.etowahhcp.org)

### The Draft Aquatic Habitat Conservation Plan Policies

#### Stormwater Management

Adapted from the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District ordinance, the HCP policy includes performance standards for water quality protection, stream channel protection, and flood protection.

In addition, the Etowah HCP stormwater ordinance includes a performance standard that limits the volume of runoff in watersheds most critical to the survival of the fish species of the Etowah HCP. This “runoff limit” standard is what makes the HCP such an effective tool for protecting imperiled species in the Etowah. In the map on the back, green areas depict priority one locations and beige areas depict priority two locations; the “runoff limit” standard will apply to both of these areas.

#### Stream Buffer

Two different stream buffer ordinances are proposed. For the more mountainous counties the ordinance requires protection of 50 ft. buffers. Since state law already requires 50 ft. buffers on trout streams, there will be no change in buffer width on most streams in these counties. For downstream jurisdictions, the ordinances require an additional 25



photo: University of Georgia

Etowah Falls

### Threats

Recent research conducted by the University of Georgia and the US Geological Survey revealed four primary stressors to the listed fish. They include:

- Stormwater Runoff
- Loss of Riparian Areas
- Sedimentation
- Habitat Fragmentation

Stormwater runoff from roads, parking lots and rooftops carries pollutants and alters the natural flows of water. In addition, erosion from construction sites deposits sediment in streams, physically harming fishes and degrading their habitat. Other development activities, such as reservoirs and poorly designed culverts, can create movement barriers that isolate fish populations.



ft. setback for impervious surfaces, for a total 75 ft. setback. This requirement is identical to that required by the Metro District of which the downstream jurisdictions of the Etowah basin are members. Therefore, the HCP does not require additional buffers beyond the current regulations.

**Erosion and Sediment Control**

The HCP addresses sedimentation from construction sites in two ways. First, it establishes six standard operating procedures for enforcement of existing E&S regulations. Second, the HCP includes a grading ordinance that limits the disturbed area of a site to no more than 17 acres at any one time, and requires that at least 30% of slopes of 25% or more remain undisturbed.

**Road Stream Crossings**

Road stream crossings can create barriers that limit fish movement up and down stream, fragmenting populations. The Etowah HCP Road Stream Crossing Policy requires that for new stream crossings, bridges be required for streams that drain areas of 20 mi<sup>2</sup> or greater; box and pipe culverts may be used on smaller streams, but these must be embedded or bottomless, and sized at 1.2 times the stream width, plus two feet. Multi-barrel pipe culverts are prohibited, although multi-barrel box culverts are allowed.

**Utility Stream Crossings**

The Etowah HCP includes a Utility Stream Crossing Policy that requires that directional boring be used in preference to other methods when possible. During fish spawning periods, only directional boring is permitted.

**Water Supply Planning**

The HCP includes a protocol to assist local governments in identifying reservoir locations with the least impact on protected fishes. The protocol is a procedure for evaluating the impacts of potential reservoir locations.

**Monitoring and Adaptive Management**

The monitoring program will include biological monitoring, to monitor the plan's effect on fish populations and habitat, and compliance monitoring to monitor the effectiveness of local governments in implementing the plan. Information collected through the monitoring program will be used in the plan's adaptive management program.

**Contact Information**

Georgia Ecological Services  
Field Office: 706/613 9493

