

Want the Feds telling Georgia how to manage our Marsh Buffers?

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Tom Barton: Dead marsh walking Wednesday, March 18, 2015

Savannah turned itself a festive green Tuesday for the best St. Patrick's Day parade this side of Dublin.

Unfortunately, this part of the state is simultaneously turning another shade of green — the kind that goes with nausea.

That's because state lawmakers have inserted poison pills into a bill, now before the Georgia Legislature, that was supposed to protect the public's saltwater marshes. Instead of safeguarding this precious and fragile resource from sedimentation, pollution and other scourges, legislators are prepared to bash it with their equivalent of a shillelagh.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way.

State Sen. Ben Watson, R-Savannah, introduced Senate Bill 101 this session to require a 25-foot buffer around marshes. He did it with noble intentions — to repair an 11-year-old buffer rule that the state Environmental Protection Division shoved into its shredder last year.

But what started out as a rescue mission looks more like a death march. That's because Watson's bill includes two loopholes you could drive a bulldozer and dump truck through — side by side.

The first includes an exemption from the buffer requirement if the property is next to "shoreline stabilization structures" like seawalls and revetments. This means developers can build factories, commercial projects or high-end homes right up to the shoreline without getting a buffer variance.

That's peachy for them, but pits for the coastal ecosystem.

The second loophole gives the equivalent of an automatic exemption to projects already permitted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They include everything from small docks to huge industrial operations. Call it an equal-opportunity buffer leveller, one that the special interests and sand bubbas can love.

Some had hoped that Watson's bill would include a ban on fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals within 25 feet of the marsh, which makes sense. But they would have had more luck asking lawmakers for a ride on a unicorn.

As it stands, Watson's flawed bill easily passed the Senate. It's now in the hands of the House. Coastal lawmakers should lead the charge to amend and strengthen the Senate bill by closing the loopholes. But their problem is numbers. North Georgia beats South Georgia. A big fear is that protecting coastal marshes could lead to protecting upstate lakes and rivers, which is contrary to many lawmakers' value systems — as in this land is too valuable to waste on silly buffers.

Watson worries that opening the bill to amendments could cause the bill's demise, as he had to compromise to get it through the Senate. That's a legitimate concern. However, that may not be such a horrible thing.

This is one time when a mercy killing is better than a zombie-like creation out of the "Walking Dead" — which is what some healthy saltwater marshes may become.



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