



Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission
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Watershed Dams in Georgia

Under The Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act, the Soil Conservation Service/Natural Resources Conservation Service was authorized to cooperate with states and local agencies to carry out works of improvement for soil conservation and for other purposes including flood prevention; conservation, development, utilization and disposal of water; and conservation and proper utilization of land.

Specific rules govern development of a watershed plan:

- All watershed plans require a non-USDA governmental sponsor
- Sponsors are required to obtain all land rights
- Sponsors are responsible for the operation and maintenance (O&M) of the structural measures (dams, channels and critical treatment areas)

Since 1957, there have been 357 dams constructed under the USDA-NRCS flood control programs (primarily in North Georgia.)

Landowners grant perpetual easements to construct the dams, store floodwater, and grant ingress for operation and maintenance.

Twenty-three of the 40 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) in Georgia have watershed dams, hold the majority of the perpetual easements and sponsor most of these dams. Many of the dams are co-sponsored by county or municipal governments, especially where the dams include industrial, municipal and/or recreation storage. The districts and other co-sponsors operate and maintain these structures through annual appropriations of funds by state and local governments.

(Georgia Districts have signed Watershed Agreements as sponsors and co- sponsors for some 100 watershed projects.)

Current status of watershed dams in Georgia

Some of the 357 dams today are in a different setting than when they were constructed. Population has grown, residential and commercial development has occurred upstream and downstream from the dams, land uses have changed, sediment pools have filled and concrete and metal components have deteriorated.

Because of hazards in the dam failure zone (roads , bridges , houses and commercial buildings), many dams do not meet current state dam safety regulations that have been enacted and revised with more stringent requirements than when the dams were built. Many of these dams are also nearing the end of their planned life span of 50 years and some need rehabilitating to ensure they remain safe, continue to function as designed and continue providing flood control benefits. The Georgia Soil and Water Conservation Commission (GSWCC) and USDA's NRCS cooperate with local SWCDs to provide technical assistance and funding to address the operation and maintenance of these structures.

In Georgia, one well-known dam disaster is the Toccoa Falls failure in 1977. On November 6, 1977, at 1:30 a.m., a private dam, the Kelly Barnes Dam, failed after a period of heavy rain resulting in extensive financial damage and loss of life. In 1978, the Georgia General Assembly passed the Georgia Safe Dams Act, which requires that certain engineering and design standards be met.

More information

USDA-NRCS sources provided much of the information contained in this article.

The NRCS maintains information on watershed dams at

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/landscape/wr/>.

A history of their program is available at

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?&cid=nrcs143_010953).

A January 2013 NRCS progress report is available at

http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1082505.pdf.