

March 5, 2010

www.gfagrow.org

Volume 7 Issue 7

Snow and ice blanketed much of North Georgia earlier this week, but that didn't stop things from heating up at the State Capitol. Although the General Assembly is in recess, select committees were allowed to meet in the hopes that key bills would be ready for votes by the full House and Senate when lawmakers return on Monday. In addition to those committees, more budget hearings were held for select state agencies. Among those giving presentations was the Georgia Forestry Commission. Director Robert Farris painted the grim picture for lawmakers: things are bad this year for the Commission, and they won't get better in 2011.



Senate Higher Education Chairman and GFA member Seth Harp (R-Midland) discussed cuts to Georgia's universities earlier this week. These cuts could greatly impact the Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources at UGA.

The University System of Georgia had its hearing as well and was hit with a harsh reality: they may face \$300 million in cuts from its budget. The plan will require the University of Georgia to cut an additional \$60 million on top of the already proposed \$40 million. So what will this mean for the Warnell School? It's uncertain at this point, but the forestry school's public service and outreach programs, as well as the financial support they receive for research, could be among the first things to go.

Several of the bills the Georgia Forestry Association supports saw action and will land on the floor of the Senate soon, while many others will be heard in their appropriate committee next week. The legislature has reached the halfway point, and there are now only twenty days remaining....

Issue Watch

Senate Bill 409 by Senate Finance Chairman **Ronnie Chance** (R-Tyrone) requires that when subsidies are granted for new industries on the purchase of raw materials, those same incentives will be given to existing businesses as well. The bill passed out of the Senate Finance Committee, and will now head to the Senate Rules Committee to be placed on the debate calendar. GFA supports this bill.

Senate Bill 346 by Senate Majority Leader **Chip Rogers** (R-Woodstock) attempts a major overhaul of the property tax appeals process in Georgia. Its components include year-round property appeals; ensuring that every property receives an annual notice of reassessment; establishing time limits for assessor action in response to appeals; statewide uniformity of assessment notices and appeal forms; allowing counties to accept payment plans for property taxes and to provide incentives for early payments; and, requiring a unanimous vote by the Board of Equalization members when increasing an assessed value. SB 346 also passed out of the Senate Finance Committee, and will also head to the Senate Rules Committee. GFA supports this bill.

GFA's main initiative, **House Bill 1028**, will amend the Forest Land Protection Act to remove obstacles to enrollment related to potential liability of an owner of land in a covenant who sells or transfers a portion of the property to someone who later breaches the covenant. HB 1028 passed the full House of Representatives overwhelmingly by a vote of 139 to 26, and currently rests in the Senate Finance Committee. GFA is currently working to get a hearing on the bill as soon as possible to expedite its passage through the Senate. Please contact your State Senator to solicit his or her support when HB1028 hits the Senate floor.

The following bills were recently introduced.

House Bill 1218 is the Governor's "Transportation Investment Act of 2010" and is being carried by the Administration's Floor Leader Rep. **Jim Cole**(R-Forsyth). The plan includes \$300 million per year in General Obligation Bonds for the next 10 years that would pay for statewide projects that predominantly advance the movement of freight via road and rail. The proposal also calls for a referendum to be held the same day in each of 12 pre-designated regional districts around the state to decide on a 1% sales tax that would be used for funding transportation programs agreed to in advance by each region. The regions would be determined by the current "regional commission" district boundaries. This referendum, according to the Governor's plan, is not slated to be voted on until 2012 and, if passed, the tax would be levied in 8-year intervals, pending approval in subsequent referenda years. The bill has been heard twice in the House Subcommittee on Transportation and will be heard a third time on Monday.

House Bill 1267 by Rep. **Tom Weldon** (R-Ringgold) will increase the penalty for timber harvests (1) where the defendant is a willful trespasser to 3 times the full value of the property at the time, in addition to punitive damages and attorney fees; (2) where the defendant is an unintentional purchaser to 3 times the value at the time of conversion, also covering the attorney fees of the damaged party; and (3) where the defendant is a purchaser without notice from a willful trespasser to the value of the timber at the time of removal, in addition to the damaged party's attorney fees. GFA is currently receiving comments on HB 1267.

A bill that has yet to be introduced is known as the "River Basin Protection Act". Under the Act, existing permitted interbasin transfers would be required to meet the criteria outlined for interbasin transfers. The permitting criteria outlined in the bill are prohibitive and requires applicants to prove "no cost effective alternative" exists to current or proposed interbasin transfers. The Act would also prohibit the movement of water to more than one adjacent county. There are many counties in Georgia that are interconnected with neighboring counties in order to ensure reliable water supplies. Some argue that the policies outlined in the River Basin Protection Act directly conflict with the goals and policies of Georgia's Statewide Water Management Plan. This legislation, expected to be formally introduced following the recess, is a high priority for the environmental community and has 70 co-sponsors in the House.

The following bills will be heard in committee next week.

- **House Resolution 1/House Bill 517** by Rep. **Ed Lindsey** (R-Atlanta) will be in the Ad Valorem Subcommittee of House Ways & Means on Monday. These bills will cap property tax reassessments at 3% per year or 9% for a 3 year period.
- **House Bill 1008** by Rep. **Allen Peake** (R-Macon) extends the time during which the price of various forms of energy used by manufacturers is capped for purposes of the state sales tax. Although not on the agenda at this time, it is rumored that HB 1008 will be in the Ways & Means Sales Tax Subcommittee Monday. GFA supports this bill.
- A pair of bills dealing with Cap & Trade will be heard in the Senate Natural Resources Committee on Monday. **Senate Bill 409**, the 'Georgia Energy Freedom Act of 2010', by Sen. **Mitch Seabaugh** (R-Sharpsburg) will make sure that any federal program implementing a cap & trade system will undergo a comprehensive assessment evaluating the impact and whether or not Georgia's compliance with the system is in the state's best interest. **Senate Resolution 973** by Sen. **Bill Heath** (R-Bremen) urges Congress to proceed carefully and avoid passing any cap and trade legislation that would negatively impact the country. SR 973 states that global climate fluctuations are not fully understood at this time, and any action should be postponed until further studies are undertaken.

Other Political Tidbits



Nathan Deal, Republican candidate for governor.

Congressman **Nathan Deal** from Gainesville has announced that he will resign his seat in the United States House of Representatives at the end of March. Deal announced his resignation on Monday so that he could campaign for governor full-time, but decided midway through the week that he would stay until a vote on healthcare is taken. Once Deal retires, a special election will be called by the governor to fill the vacant seat. Among those in the race to succeed Congressman Deal are State Senator **Lee Hawkins** (R-Gainesville), State Representative **Tom Graves** (R-Ranger) and former State Senator **Bill Stephens**.

Congressman **John Linder**, Representative from Georgia's 7th congressional district, has announced that he will retire at the end of the 111th Congress. Linder, a former dentist and State Representative, has represented Georgia in the United States House of Representatives since 1993 and was the sponsor and primary advocate of the FairTax Act. State Senator and Senate Rules Chairman **Don Balfour** (R-Snellville) will run to replace Congressman Linder, and State Representative **David Casas** (R-Lilburn) will seek Balfour's vacant seat in the State Senate.

The General Assembly will be back in session on Monday, March 8.

For more information on the Georgia General Assembly, including contact information for your Representative and Senator, visit the Georgia Forestry Association website at www.gfagrow.org and click on Georgia General Assembly under the **Links** tab, or under the **Government Affairs** tab you may go to 'Contact Your Legislator', a particularly helpful resource if you are uncertain of the members in your local legislative delegation.

Archived *Capitol Forestry Reports* can be found on GFA's homepage, www.gfagrow.org.

**For questions or information regarding GFA's legislative program, please contact
Josh Stancil, Director of Government Affairs
478.992.8110 | josh@gfagrow.org**