

Dear Members of the Lake Oglethorpe Association:

We are your neighbors Wayne Hughes, Glenn Galau, Pat Nolan, and Lee Thaxton who represent three households on Goulding Creek downstream of Lake Oglethorpe. Since the beginning of summer, those who manage the Lake Oglethorpe reservoir have not allowed any water to flow downstream into the creek. Indeed those who manage water levels in Lake Oglethorpe have for decades behaved as if they are the owners of the water in the lake, releasing and holding water with only the goal to maintain an esthetic water level in the lake.

During the last nine years of drought, we have seen progressively lower summertime flows in downstream Goulding Creek when the lake is closed. It is now almost dry, or nonflowing, from the dam's outlet to where it joins Big Creek near Wolfskin Rd and Double Bridges Rd. We believe that downstream Goulding Creek is in much worse condition than it should be during this extended drought: it is in that condition partly because the Lake Oglethorpe water managers have not released any water.

Lee Thaxton asked to speak to the LOA Board about a possible limited release. Prior to the meeting, Board President Brown Widener learned that hydrologist Rhett Jackson believed that if there was no flow into the lake from upstream, no release downstream was legally required. Brown, as well as ourselves, then determined that there was at that time no stream flow into the lake. (It is not known when the stream went dry; this is probably the first time in history that it has been checked.) Furthermore, Widener reported that Jackson predicted that any release would not restore any flow downstream. On Wednesday, 22 August, the Board kindly allowed Thaxton, Nolan and Galau to present a modest proposal based on Jackson's understanding of the law, requesting a temporary release that would test Jackson's prediction. The proposal asked the Board to immediately release up to a total of one foot of water over the next 1-3 weeks. The effect on the stream would be followed during this release. The quick refilling of the entire lake several years ago after construction of the Old Edwards bridge shows that even a single healthy rain can quickly replenish that foot of water in Lake Oglethorpe.

We appreciate the extensive time taken by Widener before the meeting, and by Rick LaFleur after the meeting, both trying to get predictions of the results of such an experiment. We have seen a version of a summary of these predictions and other concerns. We have also seen Jeff Jackson's amazingly inaccurate column in the *Oglethorpe Echo*.

We understand a ballot has already been sent out to the association members. We have not seen it. We have not been invited to present our case directly to the association, and until now we have not been provided an opportunity to respond to the relevance of, or accuracy of, other opinions or comments that may be distributed to the members. The preceding paragraphs is an attempt to make clear what our request was and the rest of this letter is our response to the opinions and concerns of which we are aware.

First the legal. It is our understanding that if the dam were built today that some level of continuous flow would be required. It could not be closed even if inputs failed (policies of the Department of Natural Resources, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, State Hydrology, Army Corp of Engineers, and others, all of whom require contemporary dams to continually release a minimal flow downstream). Because of the time of its construction, however, the Lake Oglethorpe association apparently can stop outflow when inflow stops. If true, there are still two uncertainties remaining.

The first is if Lake Oglethorpe has been out of compliance every summer when outflow has routinely been stopped while inflow continues, such as for most of this summer. We believe it has been out of compliance. The second is if there are significant inputs to the lake besides Goulding Creek which continue after the creek runs dry. Thaxton remembers several springs joining Goulding Creek in the region subsequently covered by the lake. One is seen on the 1995 DOT County Map and on GIS-based maps such as the parcel maps of the county. In short, other inputs to the lake may continue after upper Goulding Creek fails. Ecologist Karen Porter claims this does not occur (see below).

The experiment is simple. It would not significantly change the level of the lake, and under these conditions just doing the experiment seems more reliable than asking experts for their predictions. After all, they are out of their limits of experience. The stream flows throughout Georgia are described as ‘exceptional’ by hydrologist Todd Rasmussen and the sense from comments and data on state hydrology and climate websites is that the present situation is really unique. Certainly it is outside those conditions during any scientific study or anecdotal experience on which hydrologists Jackson and Rasmussen are basing their opinions.

One would have hoped that at least one of the four scientists consulted, or the fifth who volunteered through the *Echo*, would be excited to do an experiment in which a positive result would disprove their beliefs that are until now extrapolated from ‘nonexceptional’ conditions, and consequently everyone would learn something new. Sadly, they apparently do not understand what is proposed, or do not understand that science progresses through falsification of earlier ideas, or they just can’t be bothered.

Neither hydrologist has seen the sites. Neither knows the current or historical watertables throughout the watershed. (That Rasmussen specifies we not use any flow to water our lawns shows him to be exceptionally out of the loop, a situation apparently not corrected by the interviewer.) None of their opinions considers the complex hydrology of streams with armored stream beds that impede percolation. They present the stream beds as porous beds of sand that suck up the water as quick as you can put it in. This is not correct and is just one example of misunderstanding the situation or dumbing down their answers to fit what they think the questioner wants to hear. Ecologist Porter dismisses inputs from submerged springs from inferences she has made of watertable levels from a supposed continual decline in lake level this summer (not obvious to passersby) and from several dug wells going dry around the lake (though up through last week, at least, Widener was unaware of any such wells).

Rasmussen and Porter do not understand from where in the lake water would be released, so their concerns about surface hot water impacts on the lake and downstream are misplaced. Porter and her associates have indeed studied the lake (her peer-reviewed publications number around 50, about 42 of which are directly or indirectly related to Lake Oglethorpe or similar lakes). She has not published any study about the dredging and draining of the lake and their probable ‘damage’ to the lake and ‘its unique ecosystem’ which was certainly much greater than would happen with the temporary one-foot drop in level we have proposed. Nor did she admit such a catastrophe (as she would have to predict it was) had occurred.

Wildlife biologist Jeff Jackson’s math is just carelessly wrong. His flow rates are at least a hundred-fold higher than what we are asking for.

Neither Cary Fordyce nor the four of us who are all current or former Firefighters speak for the Wolfskin Volunteer Fire Department. However, tests recently conducted in part by two of us confidently predict that a one-foot reduction in lake level will not affect the ability to draft water from the lake at the three sites tested.

Stream biologist Mary Freeman has not seen the many fish stranded in the rapidly-shrinking pools along many areas of downstream Goulding Creek. These fish did not make it downstream along with ‘most of the stream biota’. A shame she was not asked how long it takes (if known, then of course only in otherwise ‘nonexceptional’ situations) for stream biota to reach predrought levels and what fraction are forever lost.

We’re not asking for much here, because we know we too are affected by the drought and should expect lower creek levels. But the impact is far worse than it should be, and effective water management at Lake Oglethorpe could help to soften that impact without harming anyone who lives along the lake. We know that many of you are avid environmentalists and people who appreciate nature, as are we. We trust and hope that you will be fair-minded and carefully consider our side of the request when you come to a decision of how to vote.

Sincerely,

Wayne Hughes
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Lee Thaxton

Pat Nolan

Glenn Galau