



Photo: Hugo Krispyn

#6: South Fork Edisto River

South Carolina

Threat: Excessive water withdrawals
At Risk: Fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, and water quality

The River

The Edisto River is the longest free-flowing blackwater river in the country. It flows more than 250 miles from its headwaters between Columbia and Aiken to the coast, and is characterized by extensive bottomland forests and broad floodplains. The river is home to endangered shortnose and Atlantic sturgeon, as well as American shad and striped bass. Its floodplain habitats harbor the charismatic swallow-tailed kite and numerous other wildlife. The Edisto has four state parks along its course, including Aiken State Park on the South Fork. The ACE basin, formed by the Ashepoo, Cumberahee, and Edisto rivers, is a National Estuarine Research Reserve. More than 130,000 acres of land in the ACE basin have been protected through public/private partnerships.

Summary

The Edisto River is one of South Carolina's most iconic rivers for paddlers and outdoor enthusiasts. However, excessive agriculture withdrawals can take up to 35 percent of the river's flow during summer months, threatening river health and downstream water users, including other farmers. The legislature must amend state law to create fairness among all water users and ensure enough water stays in the river to protect river health.



American Rivers
Rivers Connect Us®

2014 *America's Most Endangered Rivers®*

www.americanrivers.org

1101 14th Street NW, Suite 1400, Washington, DC 20005
(202) 347-7550

The Threat

Lax state laws enable excessive water withdrawals, threatening the Edisto and other rivers in South Carolina. Existing laws permitted a potato farm agribusiness to receive a water withdrawal registration in 2013 that would have allowed most of the river's flow to be taken during the summer from the headwaters of the South Fork of the Edisto.



Photo: Mullen Taylor

Through legal action and subsequent settlement negotiations, Friends of the Edisto was successful in cutting the registered withdrawal in half. However, even with this decreased allowance, the agribusiness is allowed to take up to 35 percent of the river's flows during droughts—times when water is most critical to the river health. This is an extremely large withdrawal for any river, and scientific studies have documented that fish and wildlife are adversely affected by far less severe flow alterations than those on the South Fork. The withdrawals impair fishing and boating as well, especially during the summer months when naturally low flows and high irrigation demand are in direct conflict.

In South Carolina, agricultural users are exempt from state permitting and are not required to curtail water withdrawals at any time. The state water agency, the Department of Health and Environmental Control, reviewed and allowed the registration on the potato farm without any public notification or consultation with its sister state agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife. State law and regulations, which require public notice and consultation for other water users, exempt agricultural registrations from these and other safeguards. The state fish and wildlife agency and citizens who cherish the Edisto River did not find out about the registration until more than a year after the application was filed.

What Must Be Done

The South Carolina Surface Water Withdrawal, Permitting, Use, and Reporting Act, which passed in 2010, set in place a state permitting process required for industrial and municipal users, and set levels of river flow that must be protected for fish and wildlife, water quality, recreation, and downstream users. Now, the law needs to be strengthened to provide greater protection and ensure there is enough water for downstream farmers. The 2010 law has no safeguards for agricultural withdrawals and there is no requirement to limit or stop withdrawals even during the most extreme droughts. There is also no requirement for public notice or public meetings for new agricultural withdrawal registrations. Additionally, the 2010 law allows far too much water to be allocated for withdrawal, with the “safe yield” for water use being set at 80 percent of a river's average annual flow. This liberal allocation for off-river uses sets up future conflicts among water users and takes too much of the water needed for healthy rivers.



Water withdrawal site; Photo: Hugo Krispyn

The South Carolina Legislature and Governor Haley must amend the 2010 surface water law to protect the health and integrity of the state's rivers, and to make it fair for all water uses—drinking water, industrial, and agricultural.

For More Information:

Gerrit Jöbsis
American Rivers
(803) 546-7926
gjobsis@americanrivers.org

Tim Rogers
Friends of the Edisto
(803) 256-4000
tfrogers@austinrogerspa.com

Ben Gregg
South Carolina Wildlife Federation
(803) 446-9200
ben@scwf.org

Ann Timberlake
Conservation Voters of South Carolina
(803) 799-0716
ann@conservationvotersofsc.org

How You Can Help

- Go to www.americanrivers.org/Edisto and **TAKE ACTION!**
- Retweet from [@americanrivers](https://twitter.com/americanrivers) on Twitter and use the hashtag **#MER2014**
- Share Edisto River posts on our [Facebook](#) page and share our posts on yours
- Keep talking about the Edisto River to decision-makers and with your friends!