



**Insider's Update: Legislative Session
March 17, 2017**

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Despite the cold temperatures, we are in the throes of spring here in Georgia. I always love seeing the bright green of new buds, and with their reappearance I'm reminded how our emotions are triggered by events that occur at the same time each year.

Another annual phenomenon underway in Georgia affects our coast just as significantly: the 40-day convening of the Legislature.

It is fairly well-known that Georgia's coast is protected by some of the strongest laws in the nation. Even so, our advocacy work at the Capitol is critical to protecting our treasured coast. A few years ago, One Hundred Miles led the battle to add a provision to the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act requiring a 25-foot buffer to protect the salt marsh. As a new organization, that was our first major foray in Georgia state politics. Now, in 2017 – just two years later – we approached Day 1 of the session prepared to tackle the safe storage of coal ash and as the go-to defender of our protective coastal laws.

As I write this message, Day 33 of the session has just ended, and I'm sitting at my hotel in Atlanta reflecting on the last few weeks and where we're likely to find ourselves on Day 40.

There is good news and bad news.

Good news: Thousands of people all over the state are actively participating in decision-making concerning legislative issues affecting our coast. And through collaboration with other organizations and outreach to our own constituents, we have a tremendous reach. For example, since January 15, OHM and partners have educated 30,000 Georgians about the need for the safe storage of coal ash. Tens of thousands of emails were sent to decision-makers, and during the height of the debate in the House – a time period of about 5 days – key legislators received more than 200 phone calls every day from citizens asking them to keep our groundwater and surface water safe from coal ash contamination.

Similarly, elected officials considering changes to the Shore Protection Act received phone calls and emails from thousands of residents all across Georgia who care about our protective sand dunes. Every legislator received communication from constituents in their district asking them to protect the natural resources that support our coast. That level of engagement is something to celebrate.

Bad news: Despite these overwhelming grassroots communications, the influence of many is still outweighed by a few in powerful positions. Our coal ash bills did not move forward this year because of opposition from Georgia Power and their influence at the Capitol. And though we were able to get a terrible definition of sand dunes removed from the Shore Protection Act, the Sea Island Company continues to meddle with the bill. Additionally, it's the case every year: while we may have support from a majority of legislators, our bills are affected – either by good bills held up or bad bills passed through – by the chair of the House Natural Resources Committee.

Influencing state policy is one of the key elements we use to achieve our mission at One Hundred Miles. Rest assured: we are in this for the long haul. Even though our coal ash bills will not move forward this session, we successfully advocated for more formal study of the issue and will participate in this process over the next eight months as we prepare for 2018. And while I don't yet know what will happen with the Shore Protection Act, one thing is for sure: by being on the ground at the Capitol every week, OHM is in the right place to influence policy that affects our coast in ways no other group is capable of doing.

We are dedicated to doing what is necessary for our coast. And we are committed to finding ways to work around the obstacles. After all, persistence and commitment are the name of the game. All of us at OHM will remain both persistent and committed in order to make the systematic changes necessary for true coastal conservation.