

By: Jody A. Thompson, Environmental Educator  
Alabama Sea Grant/Auburn Marine Center

Alabama is abundant with water. The identity, culture, and economy of the State are tied to this precious resource. The waters of the State are vital for tourism, transportation, municipal and industrial supply, fisheries production and recreation. Transportation, recreation, commercial fishing: no matter how you look at it, water, and access to it, is an integral part of our lives across the state. The livelihood of some, such as oystermen, boat makers, and charter fishermen, rely on ready access to the water. However, the market for waterfront residential property is as popular as ever, putting increasing pressure on the land available for open waterfront access.

Uses of the waterfront create a tremendous economic impact on the state. According to the Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau website, approximately 4.5 million people visited Alabama's beaches in 2008 and left behind \$2.3 billion in travel-related expenditures. An estimated 41,500 people were employed in travel-related jobs and collected around \$928 million in wages. Close to 50,000 jobs along the Alabama coast were created by tourism and recreation, according to a Gulf of Mexico Alliance report, and the National Marine Fisheries Service reported the annual commercial fisheries landing statistics for Alabama in 2008 to be over 24 million pounds with a landed value of over \$44 million.

According to the Coalition of Alabama Waterways, there are approximately 1400 miles of federally funded navigable waterways in Alabama with links to 21 states. Over \$140 million in Federal dollars are brought into the state each year for waterways. Approximately 85 million tons are shipped per year via the Alabama waterways. However, the popularity of living and recreating near the water, growth and development threaten these uses. According to the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Alabama, it is estimated that by 2025, the combined coastal population of Alabama will exceed 690,000 people, a 76.9% increase in Baldwin County and a 10.9% increase in Mobile County.

In 2008, the Alabama Legislature, passed a joint resolution (HJR 656) to form the Alabama Waterfront Access Study Committee, whose goal is to research the status of the working waterfront in all of Alabama and recommend ways to "address issues of diversity of waterfront use and access in Alabama." The Committee has prepared recommendations to the Alabama Legislature that would protect and preserve waterfront access across Alabama. Recommendations include the development of a Waterfront Alabama Partnership to assist communities in protecting their waterfront access, and a state plan to assess waterfront access and plan for its future, along with 11 other recommendations. To learn more about the findings and recommendations of the Committee, contact your local Legislative representatives.