

Building Resilience Together: A Georgia Climate Digest Interview

Summary

What does it take to build a truly resilient coast? In this conversation, Jennifer Kline, Coastal Hazards Specialist with Georgia DNR's Coastal Resources Division, joins host Eriqah Vincent to talk about the unique flooding challenges facing Georgia's coast, why wetlands are the state's first line of defense against storms, and what to expect at the upcoming Georgia Resiliency Conference on Jekyll Island.

Key Takeaways

- Coastal Georgia faces multiple types of flooding beyond what inland areas experience, including storm surge and high tide flooding that can combine with heavy rain to overwhelm aging infrastructure.
- After Superstorm Sandy hit the mid-Atlantic in 2012, Georgia DNR led a decade-long effort to create disaster recovery and redevelopment plans for all 11 coastal counties, making Georgia the first state with a fully resilient coast built on FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework. That same template was later used to help southwest Georgia recover after Hurricane Michael.
- Wetlands act as natural water storage, filter pollutants, stabilize shorelines, and absorb storm energy, making Georgia's marshes and beaches the state's first line of defense against hurricanes.
- The Georgia Resiliency Conference returns to Jekyll Island October 20–21, 2025, spotlighting 108 Georgia-based resilience projects and 11 from out of state, with keynotes from Dr. Wayne Clough and Monica Thornton of The Nature Conservancy.
- Jennifer finds hope in the sheer number of people, from NGOs to local governments to everyday citizens, who keep doing resilience work voluntarily, with no rules requiring it.

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Eriqah Vincent: Hi, everyone, welcome back to our fantastic Drawdown Georgia Climate Digest interview series. I'm so happy today to be joined by our fantastic guest, Jennifer Kline from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Jennifer, it's good to see you, thank you for being part of our little project here.

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, thank you for having me.

Eriqah Vincent: Great, so let's jump right in — we've got a lot of questions, and I want to get to all of them. I'm really interested in speaking with you today about what you have going on, so please formally introduce yourself to our audience, and tell us about what brought you to a career focused on coastal, climate, and environmental issues.

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, so I'm Jennifer Kline, I'm the Coastal Hazards Specialist with Georgia DNR's Coastal Resources Division Coastal Management Program. We focus on the 11 coastal counties as it relates to coastal hazards. My background is in environmental geography and geology, and I've been with the department now for 24 and a half years. Probably about 15 years ago, we really started to look at a lot of our priorities and planning, and there was just nobody really working on coastal hazards in general. It was a prime opportunity for us to tackle that.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, thank you so much. I'd love to talk more about how you got there. I think we oftentimes have folks joining, some young people, who are trying to figure that out, and that's always where my brain goes, because for me, my career path wasn't a straight line either, and there are so many different ways you can get into the environmental movement and the climate movement. So I don't know if there's anything more you want to say about what interested you while you were in school, how you got to the place where that's where you wanted to be. I was looking at your bio, and that's what you majored in — I'm always interested in hearing career paths, because there are so many ways to get into this work.

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, I mean, I actually learned a lot in college about weather and climate and coastal hazards — very interesting topics. When I started with the department, I was working in environmental protection, and I would go to industry and check them for compliance with their permits. That always meant I was the bad guy coming in. So I had the opportunity to jump over to our sister division, the Coastal Resources Division, and provide guidance and assistance to our local governments, our local communities, and also be the liaison between federal and other state agencies on anything coastal-hazards-related. We also have a grant program where we pass through about \$500,000 a year to communities, so people really like seeing me come now, as opposed to before. So that was really intriguing to me.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, thank you for that. So, speaking of Georgia, what are the biggest challenges facing Georgia's coastal communities around climate change, and what work is being done to build resiliency in local ecosystems and communities to combat some of those challenges?

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, so right now, one of the biggest challenges I see is that people know about flooding, but here in coastal Georgia, we have multiple types of flooding. We have storm events, we have storm surge from hurricanes, and we also have high tide flooding — that's something Atlanta wouldn't have to deal with, but here we'll have high tide flooding many days out of the year, and sometimes that can combine with rain events, which just exacerbates the flooding. Until recently, we haven't had a lot of efforts to update infrastructure to adapt to that change on our coast, and that's something I know our local governments on the coast are really working on — how to adapt and mitigate for those changes, especially updating infrastructure when needed. There's a lot of research going into that. And, of course, everybody wants to live here, so we have that on top of the hazards that are coming in.

Eriqah Vincent: Sure. You talk about flooding, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention we just passed the 20-year anniversary of Katrina, and you mentioned storm surge, which was the actual major issue. I think a lot of folks — I'm originally from up north, from New Jersey — a lot of people who aren't in the area, who aren't on the coast, didn't understand that it wasn't even the hurricane itself that was the major issue. There was damage, of course, but Louisiana's coast is used to hurricanes — it was the storm surge. So I'm glad you mentioned storm surge, because it feels so timely with Katrina's anniversary just passing, and how, while there are certainly different challenges for Louisiana than for Georgia, it's something to think about.

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, we actually — speaking of New Jersey — after Superstorm Sandy, and the experiences New York and New Jersey went through, we took on a huge, ten-year project to create disaster recovery and redevelopment plans for all 11 coastal counties. That includes the first six counties that face the ocean, and then we went inland one tier, so those communities could really think about — not necessarily response, like when the sirens are off and the power's back on — but recovery. What do you want your community to look like? We were the first state in the nation to have a completely resilient coast, based on FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework. Then, after Hurricane Michael hit southwest Georgia — not even coastal communities — Georgia was able to use the template we'd already created to build those same plans in southwest Georgia. So it's extremely important.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, so why wetland protection specifically? I've been watching Katrina documentaries, and they talked about wetlands and how wetlands are nature's way of blocking us from hurricanes, and how wetlands are disappearing at a rapid rate, especially in the Southeast. I'm interested in hearing from you why wetland protection, in your opinion, is such an important climate and environmental issue — and an environmental justice issue too — in Georgia, as well as other places.

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, I'd say wetlands — freshwater throughout the whole state of Georgia, and saltwater on the coast — are extremely important for us, for the state. Mainly because wetlands are our storage for a lot of water, that's natural storage.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah.

Jennifer Kline: If you've ever driven by and seen a spot where there's been a timber cut, and just after a rain event it puddles right there — that's because the timber's not there anymore to absorb that water. Wetlands have that same function, they're able to absorb it and hold it. Wetlands filter our water, wetlands have vast amounts of habitat structure, and here on the coast, our saltwater wetlands — if they're protected — that also allows our marshes to migrate where there's not a barrier in the way. As sea levels rise, we're seeing those marshes move inland, and having the ability to migrate without any barriers in the way is also extremely important. Our marsh stabilizes the shoreline and prevents erosion — it's huge. Our marshes and our beaches are our first line of defense from storms. They absorb such a significant amount of energy, and that helps protect the communities built behind them.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, thank you for mentioning that, that's so important. I don't think it's something — like you said, if you've ever driven by a marsh or a wetland, I think a lot of us are familiar with where they are, but don't really have a full understanding. Even someone who's been in the movement as long as I have, almost 20 years, and as long as you have — you said you've been at the agency 24 years — not even understanding the natural resource side of why it's so important to protect wetlands, even knowing where they are and seeing them all the time.

So, this year, you and your team at the Department of Natural Resources are hosting the Georgia Resiliency Conference. Please tell us all about this event, and how it's evolved over the years. I'm mildly familiar with it, but I really want to hear more.

Jennifer Kline: So it hasn't evolved much, because in 2016, when we held the inaugural Georgia Resiliency Conference, we had such a great response to it that we kind of felt like, if it's not broke, don't fix it. So we stuck with the pattern we'd been going with. 2016 was the first, 2021 was the second, and this is the third — it's going to be the same layout. My goal for this

conference has always been to highlight the work being done in our state to address coastal hazards and build resilience to them. A lot of people don't know about it, and we don't do enough to promote the great work happening in our state. This is an opportunity to say, hey, this is what we're doing, do you want to partner with us on it? Or, oh my gosh, I can't believe the City of Brunswick did this project, we can do the same thing in our area. It's an opportunity to not be redundant, to learn from each other, to network, and to find out all the great things happening here. This year we have 108 Georgia projects that will be highlighted at the conference, and 11 out-of-state projects that we felt we could really learn from as a state, and bring back here. That's really exciting to me, to be able to highlight that.

Eriqah Vincent: We've mentioned this on the show many times, so it bears repeating — I think it's so easy for us in this work, and in a lot of other lines of work right now, to look at all the bad things happening, and the ways things feel like they're being rolled back, or progress is being halted, or moving two steps forward and three steps back. So I'm always excited to bring folks on the show who are like, we're full steam ahead, we have projects, we have this, we have that, we're bringing folks together, we're still working — because it's very easy to get, one, to disassociate, but two, to also get very bogged down in all the stuff and the muck we experience, and not really look up and see all the great work that's still happening, still moving ahead full steam. I think the conference, and the projects you mentioned, are a great testament to how we can keep moving forward, regardless of the political climate, regardless of what's going on around us, both statewide and federally.

So — the conference sounds fantastic. Who should attend, what is the audience, and what can attendees expect to gain from the event?

Jennifer Kline: Yeah, so anyone who's interested in what's going on in your state, and how we're addressing some of these resiliency efforts. We've had people register who were just retired and interested. We've had church organizations register, local governments, non-government organizations, government organizations, state and federal agencies, and a lot of researchers. So really and truly, if you're interested in the topic, there's something for everyone. Like I said, you can expect it to be very heavy on project presentations. We'll have a couple of keynote speakers — Dr. Wayne Clough, the former president of Georgia Tech and secretary of the Smithsonian, will be one of our keynote speakers, and Monica Thornton with The Nature Conservancy will be another. We're really excited to hear from them as well. I think you can also expect a lot of networking, and just a great opportunity to be with each other.

Eriqah Vincent: Fantastic, I love that, and I also love hearing that it's not just for nonprofit folks, but anyone who's interested in the topic can feel welcome, and feel like they've gained something from it. Thank you so much for talking about the conference — I hope folks will spend some time and think about attending. Tell us again when the conference is.

Jennifer Kline: It's October 20th and 21st. It kicks off on the 20th at 7:30 in the morning, and it's going to be held at the Jekyll Island Convention Center — not too shabby a place to visit.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely.

Jennifer Kline: We're just super excited — there's more information on our conference website, GeorgiaClimateConference.org.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, fantastic. I've never had the pleasure of attending, but I hope to, soon enough. Thank you so much for coming to talk about it, and for welcoming folks regardless of

their vocation or occupation to the event. Congratulations to you all for being able to hold another event — I'm an event planner myself, and I know it's no small task, especially these days. So congratulations to you all for being able to do it once more.

This is my favorite question, our last one, and I'm always glad we end with this one because it's on an up note: what's giving you hope around climate and environment in Georgia?

Jennifer Kline: Well, I kind of alluded to it already, but seeing the commitment from NGOs, from state government, from local communities, from academia, from this wide range of citizens continuing to do the work voluntarily — there are no rules requiring it, and they're still doing it, from a bottom-up approach. I think that gives me hope that we're going to continue to see this happening, even more so in the future.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, I completely agree with you. I think folks are not going to stop — they're going to do the best they can to keep working forward as they see the positive changes and outcomes in their communities. So I don't disagree with you at all, and I think you're absolutely right.

Thank you again, Jennifer, for being with me today, and for talking about the Georgia Resiliency Conference. We'll post information about the conference with this interview, and I hope you'll all join Jennifer and her team down at Georgia DNR and go to Jekyll Island, and have some fun for me.

Thank you all so much for being with us once again today. Thank you again, Jennifer, have a great day, and we'll see you all next time. Thank you, bye-bye.