



JUNE 2026

Recreation Tourism + Small Towns

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President

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Agenda

—— *Wild and Working Lands:
Why Care?*

—— *Outdoor Economy 101*

—— *Case Studies*

—— *Questions*





HOMEGROWN CONSERVATION WORKING FOR GEORGIA'S FUTURE

At Georgia Conservancy, our *mission* is simple: *healthy* lands, *thriving* communities, and a *future* where every Georgian can enjoy the outdoors for generations to come.



Wild and Working Lands: Why Care?

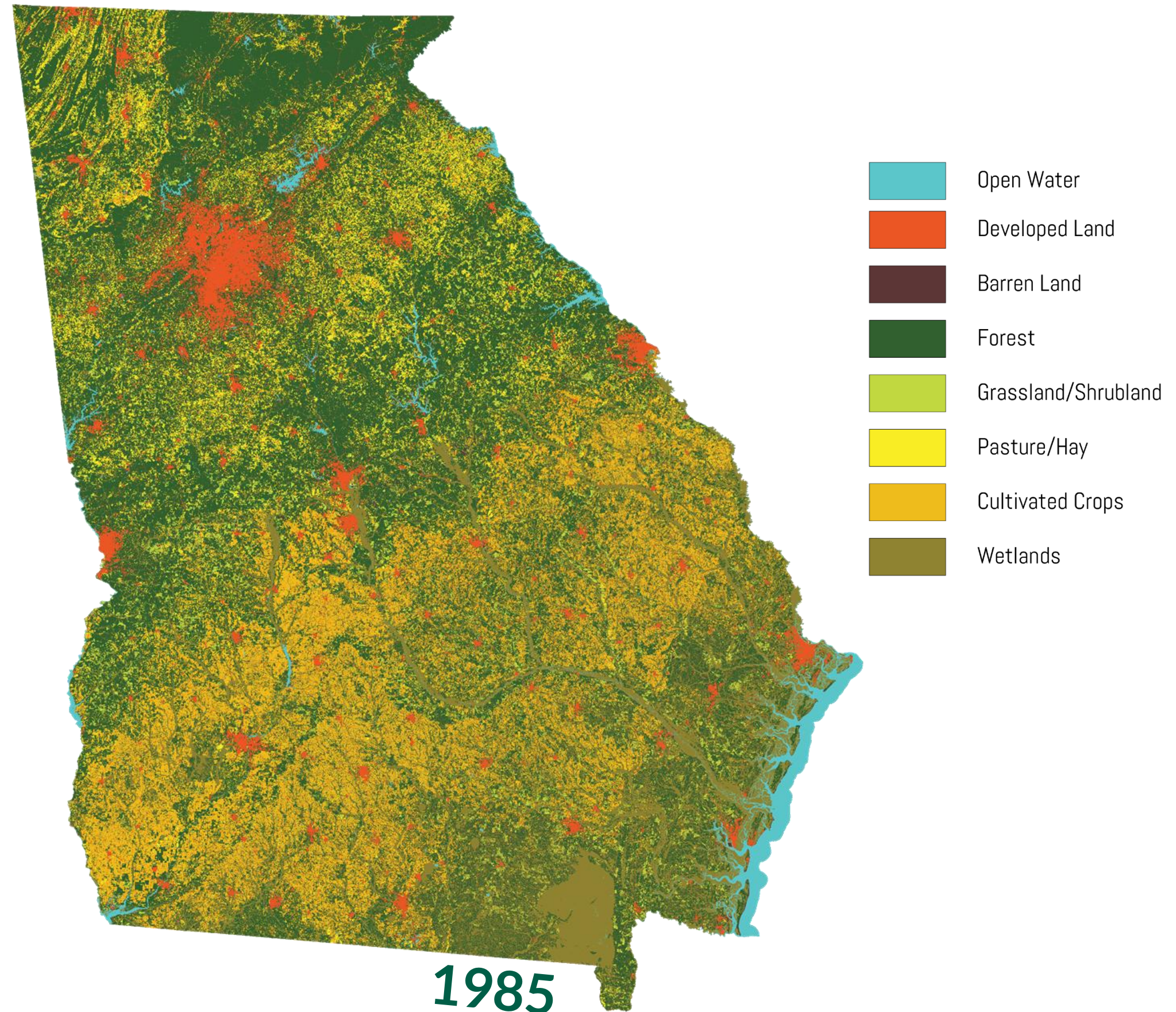




WHY PROTECT LAND?

We rely on our land for everything.

- Jobs & employment
- Housing & people
- Utilities & infrastructure
- Ecological services & habitat
- Outdoor recreation & natural resources



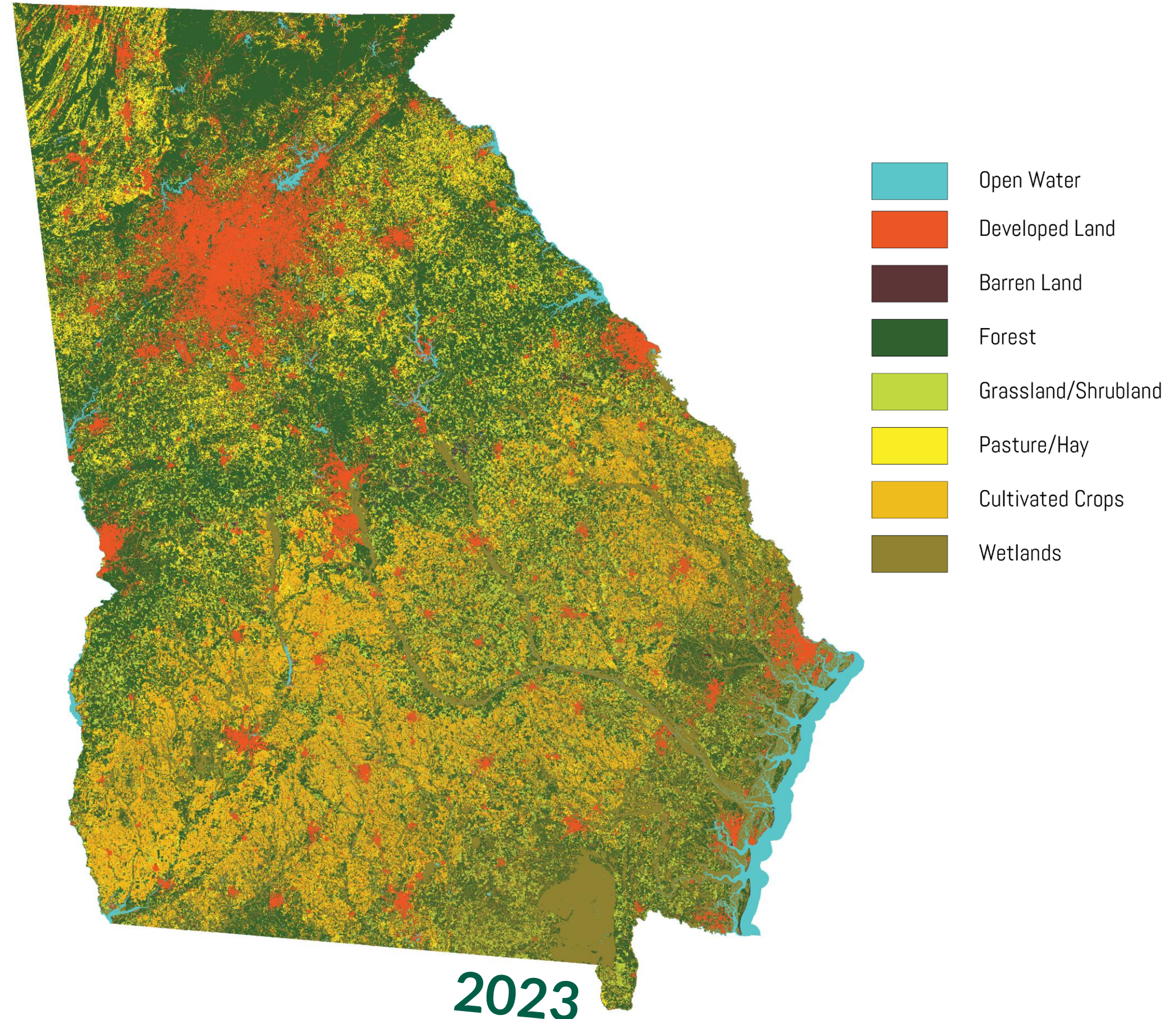


WHY PROTECT LAND?

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But our land is a limited resource.

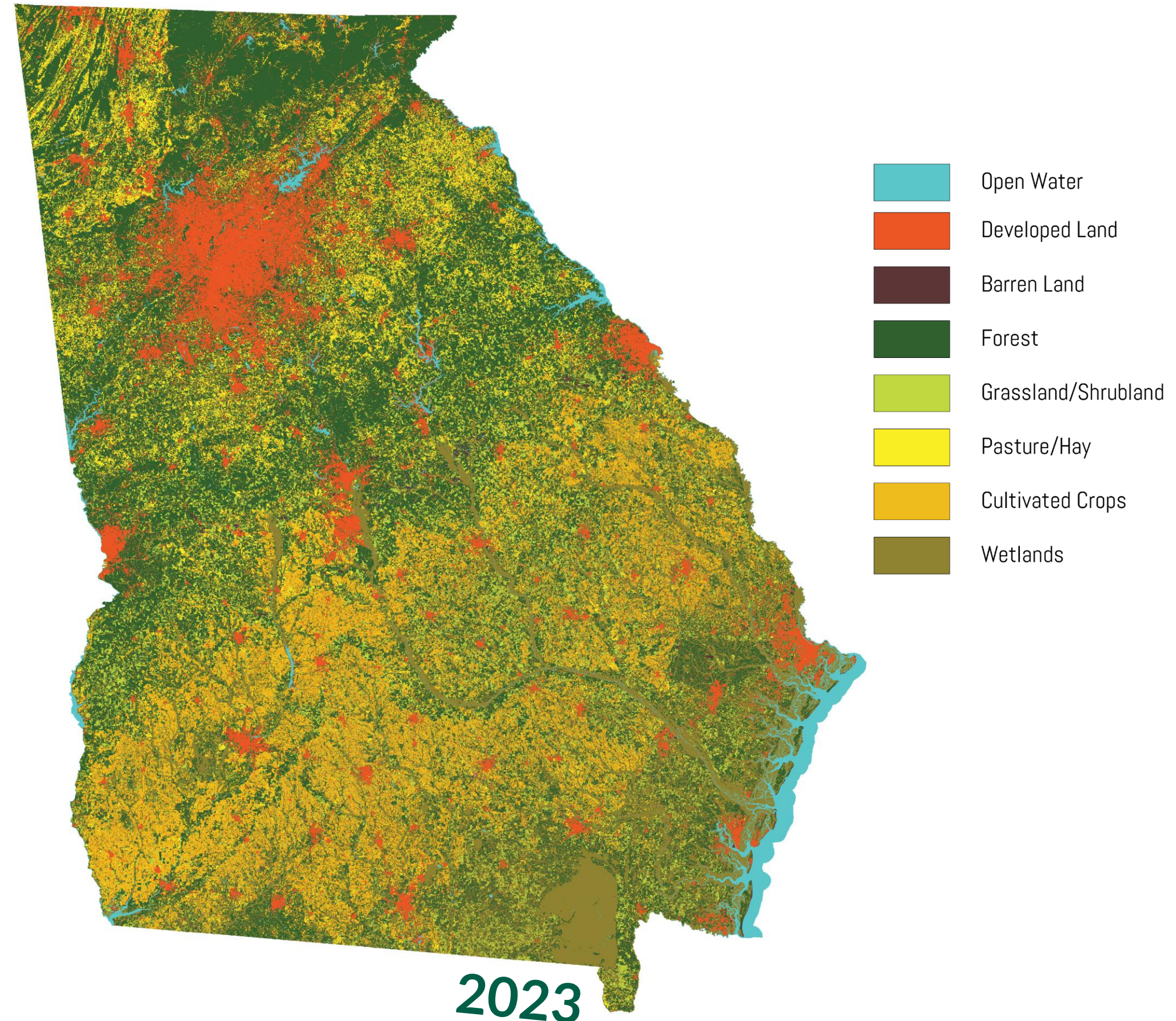




WHY PROTECT LAND?

Georgia's Natural Landscape

- 38 million acres
- 6th most biodiverse state in the US, including globally significant habitats
- 110 miles of coastline hosting 1/3 the east coast's remaining salt marsh
- >70,000 miles of waterways; 14 river basins



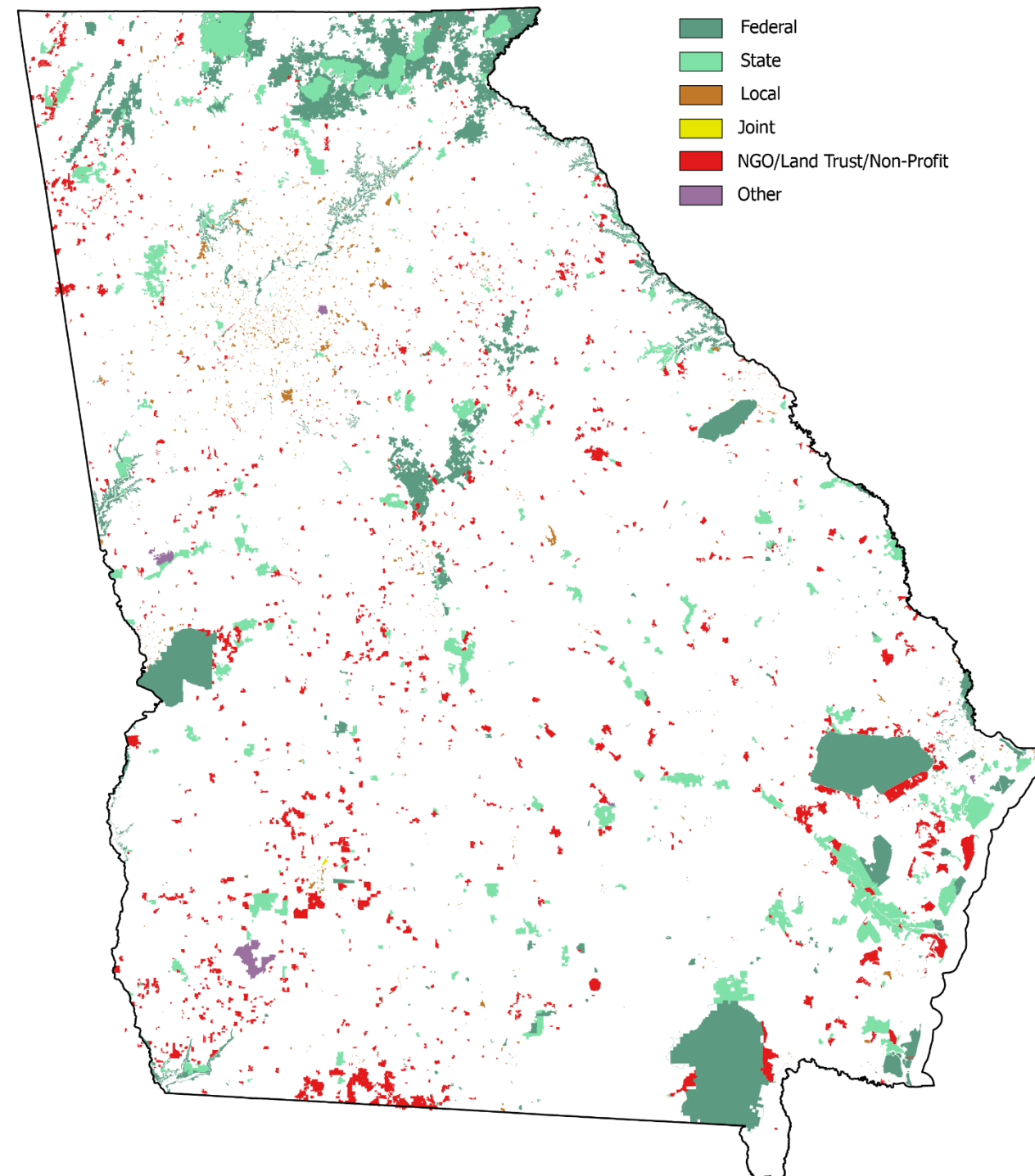
Permanently Conserved Land vs. Development



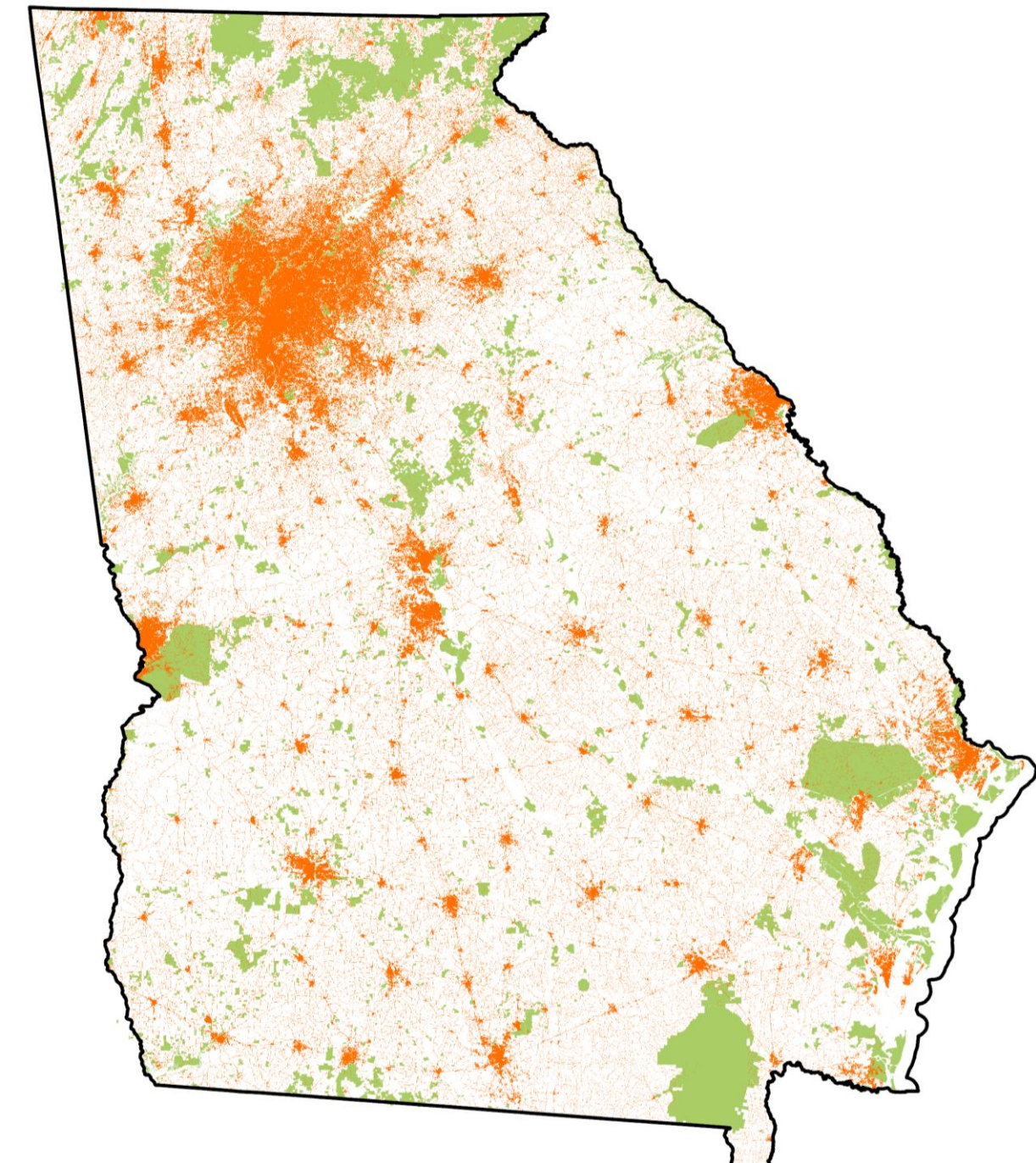
LAND CONSERVATION

As we think about where future conservation investments should go, we must be mindful of the path of development and mutually consider *wild* and *working* lands protections.

CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



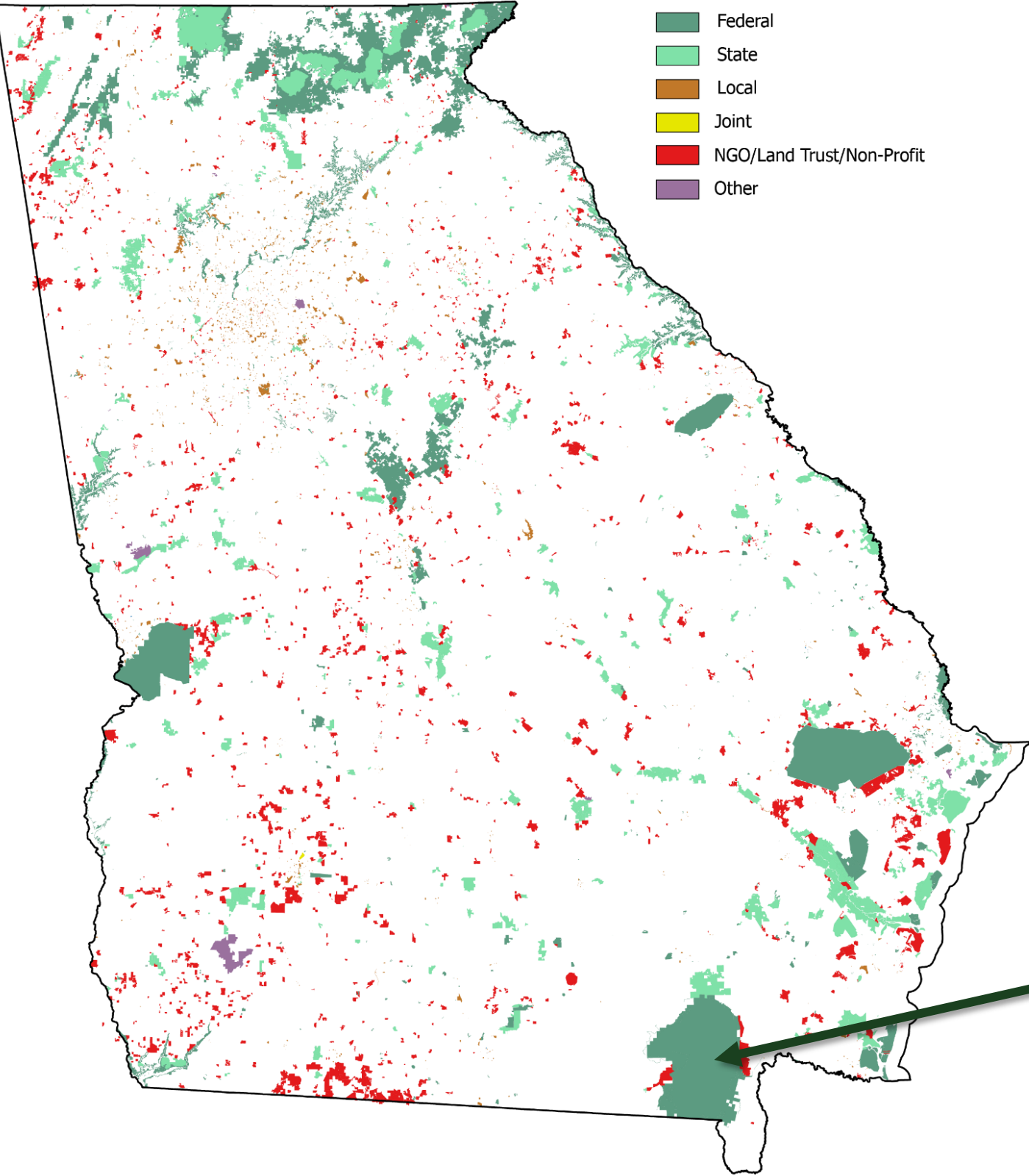
CONSERVATION LANDS VS. DEVELOPMENT, 2024



Wild Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



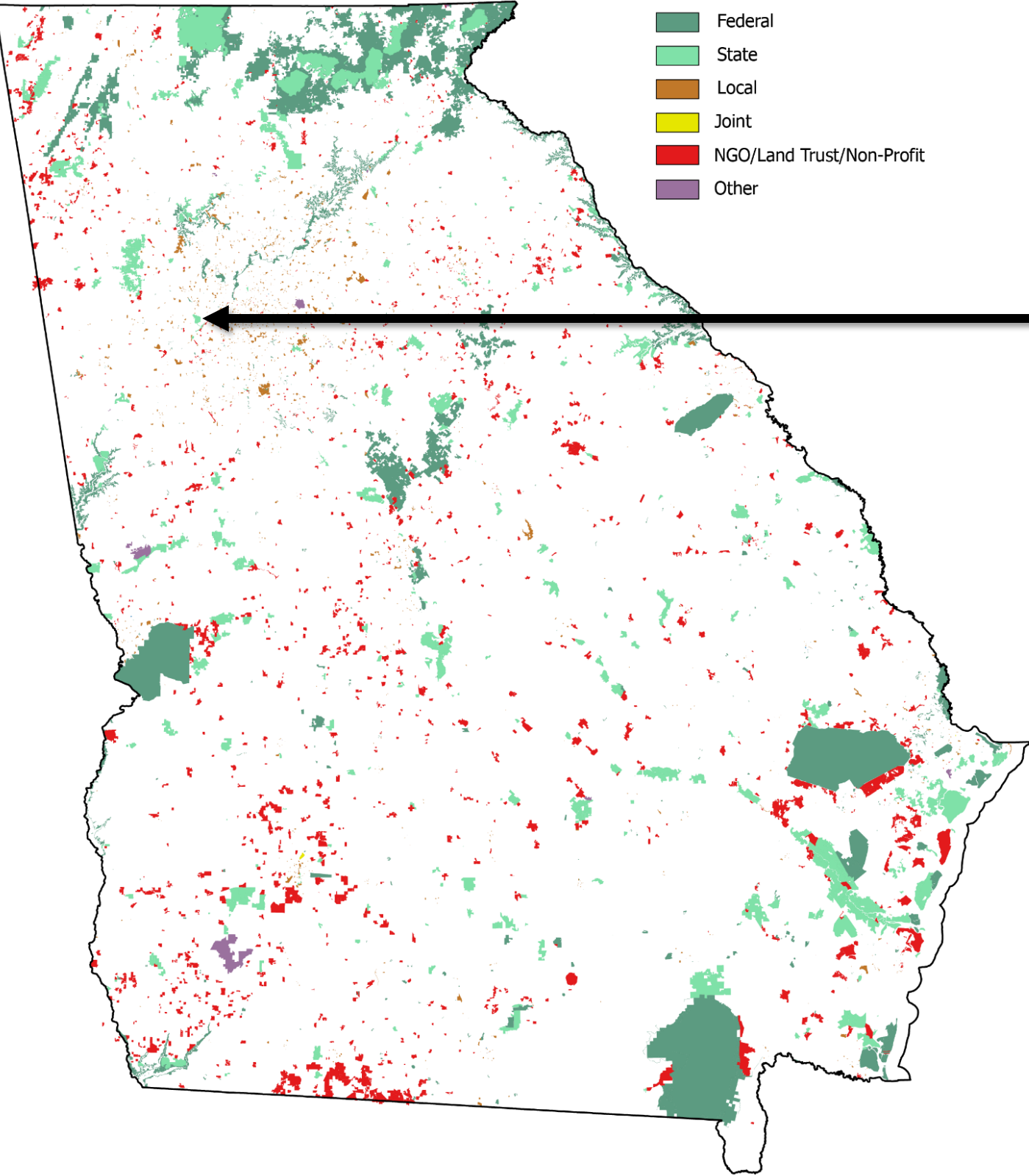
FEDERAL: Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Waycross (Ware County)



Wild Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



STATE:

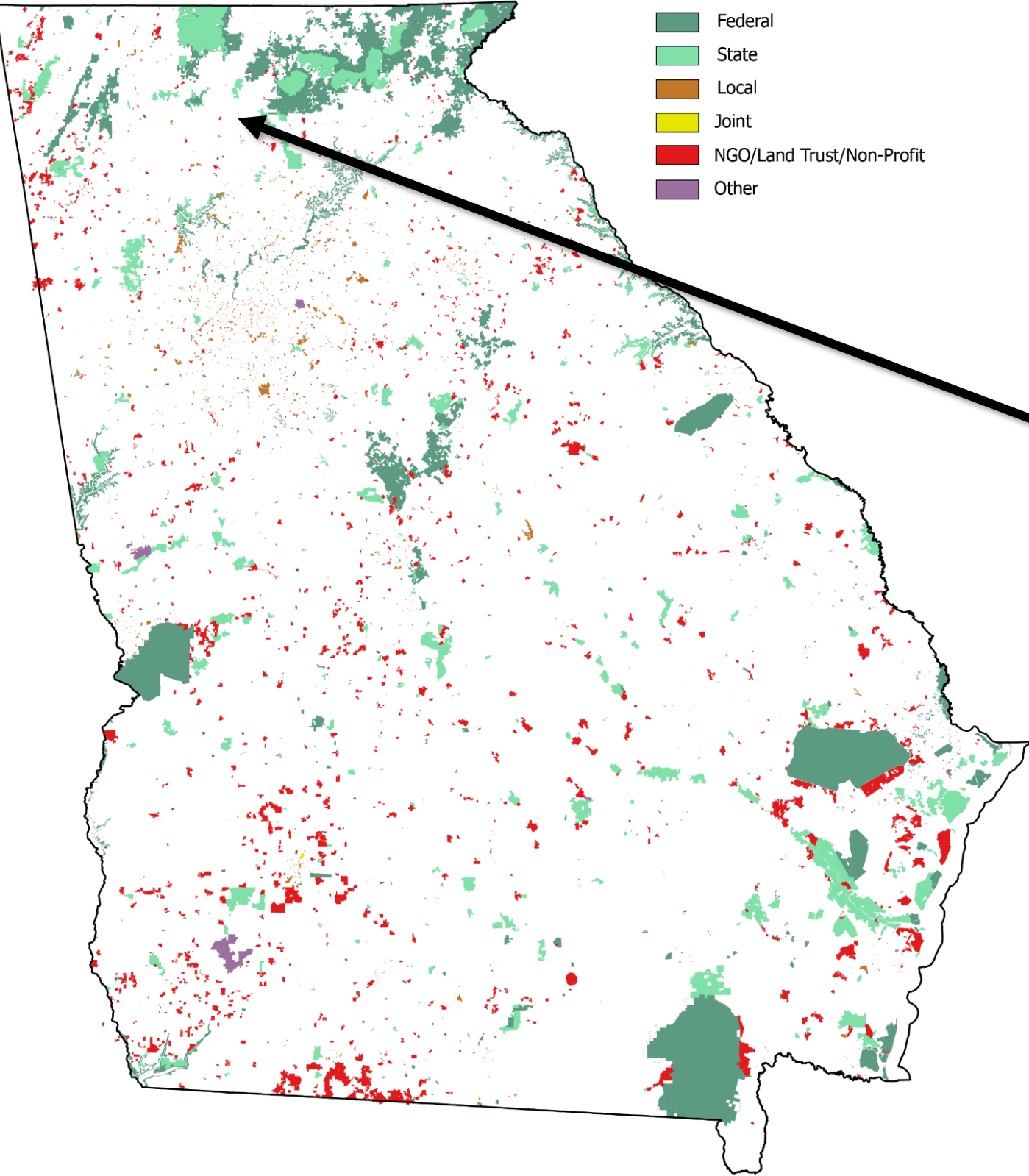
Sweetwater Creek State Park
Lithia Springs / Austell (Douglas County)



Wild Lands in GA

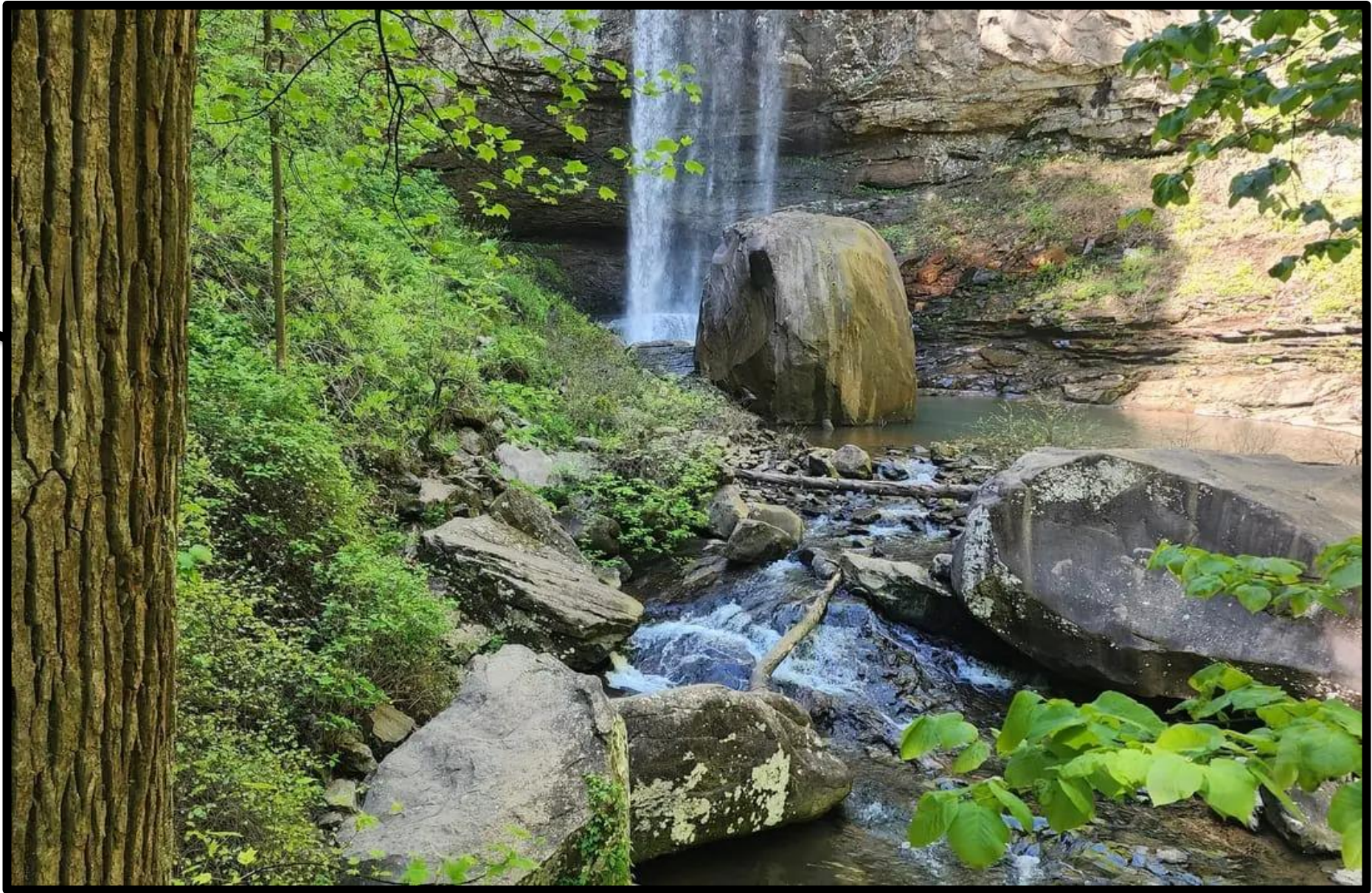


CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



LOCAL:

Talking Rock Nature Park
Talking Rock (Gilmer and Pickens Counties)



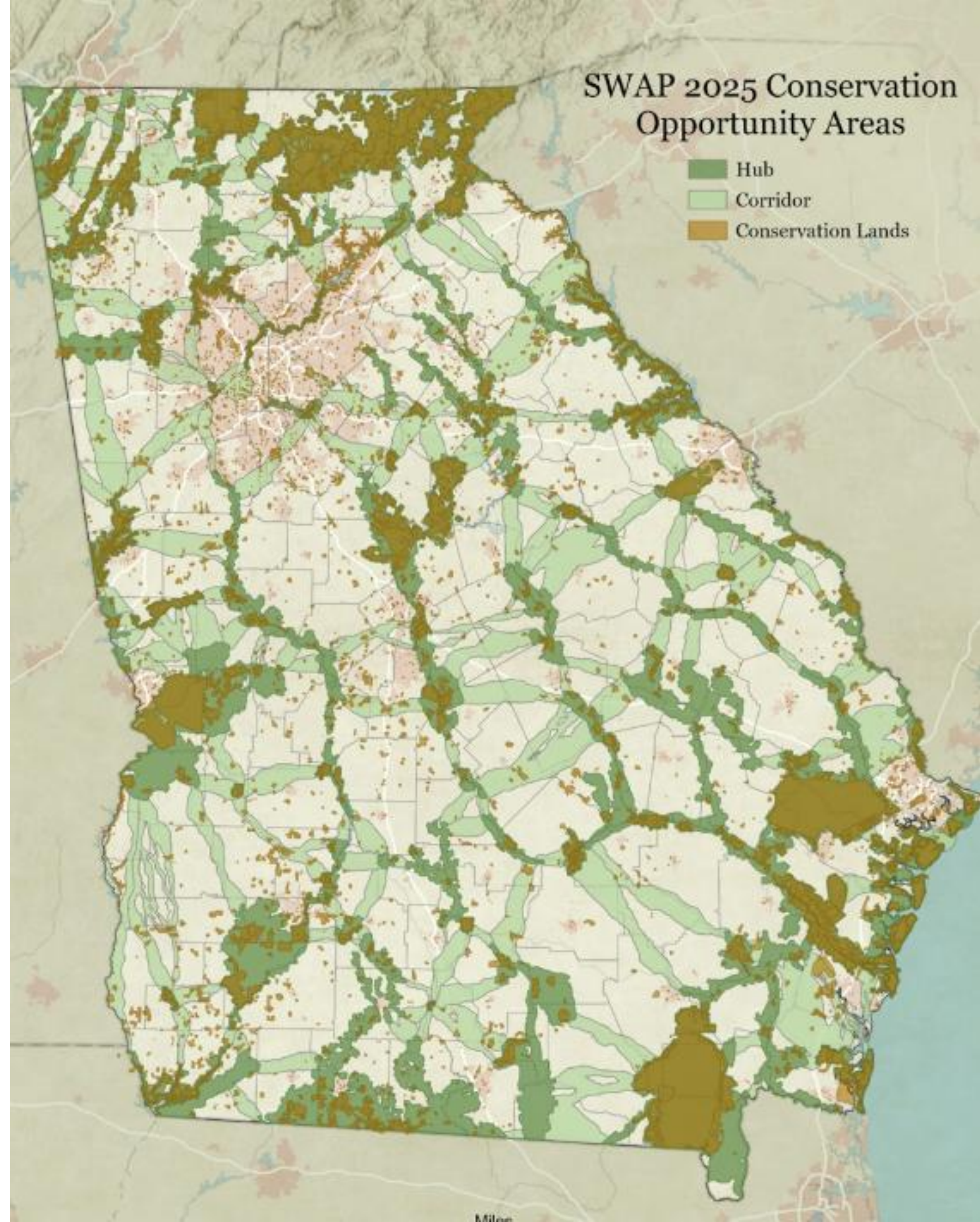
State Wildlife Conservation Priority Areas

- Millions of acres of potential lands to conserve, covering over >40% of the state
- How do SWAP areas overlap with other conservation priorities (working lands)?
- How do we stack limited funds for greatest impact?

Georgia needs mechanisms and incentives to meet conservation goals.

Georgia needs the political will and the public voice.

SOURCE: GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

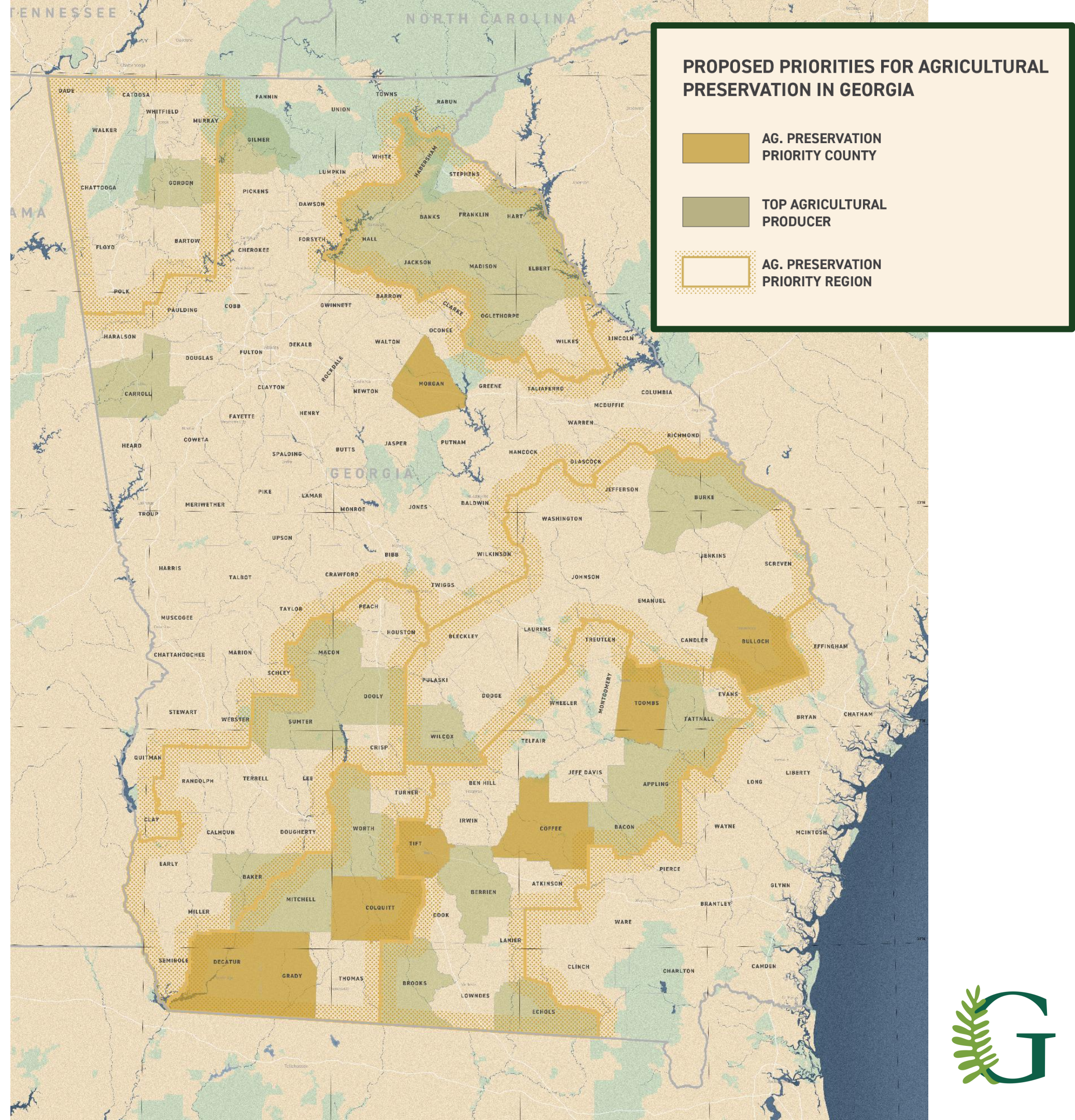


Agricultural Preservation Priority Areas

- Georgia has lost 977,691 acres of cultivated crop land from 1985-2024
- Georgia regularly produces billions of dollars in revenue (FarmGate, 2024: ~\$18B)
- There are key regions of Georgia where ag land is most productive due to soil composition, access to water, etc. Can we prioritize these for conservation?

Georgia needs mechanisms and incentives to meet conservation goals.

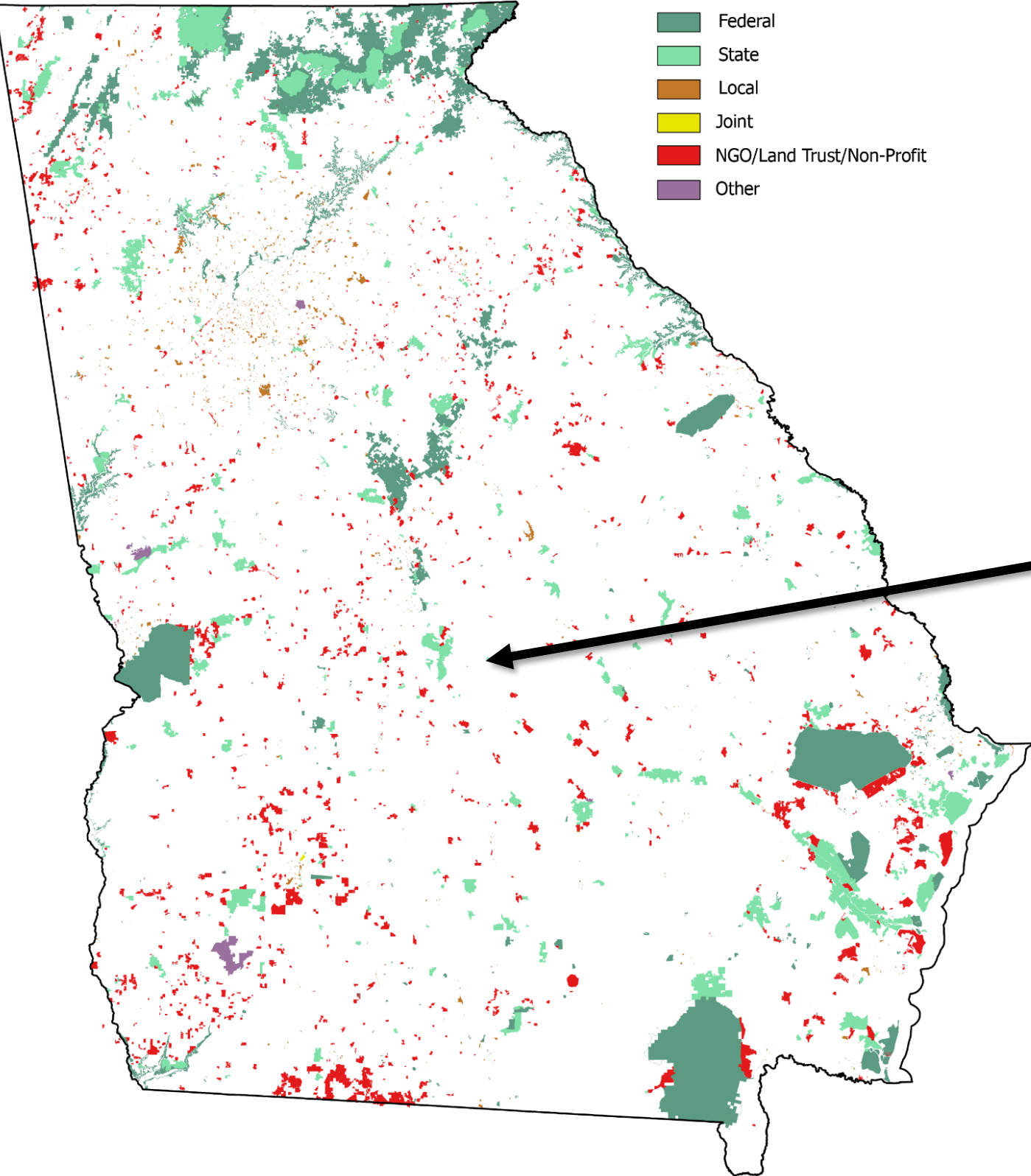
Georgia needs the political will and the public voice.



Working Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



AGRIBUSINESS:

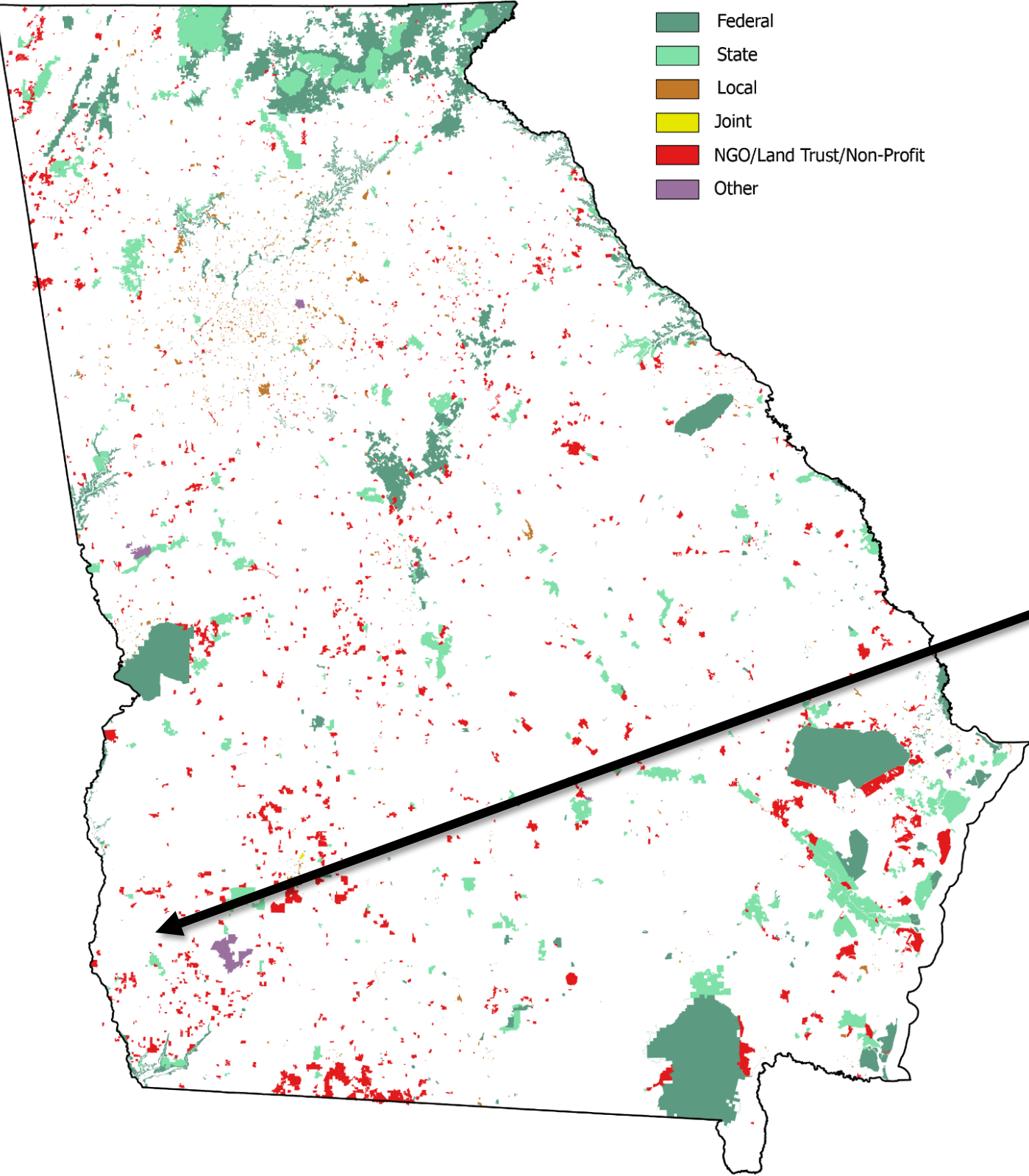
King Springs Pecan Farm
Hawkinsville (Houston County)



Working Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



AGRIBUSINESS:

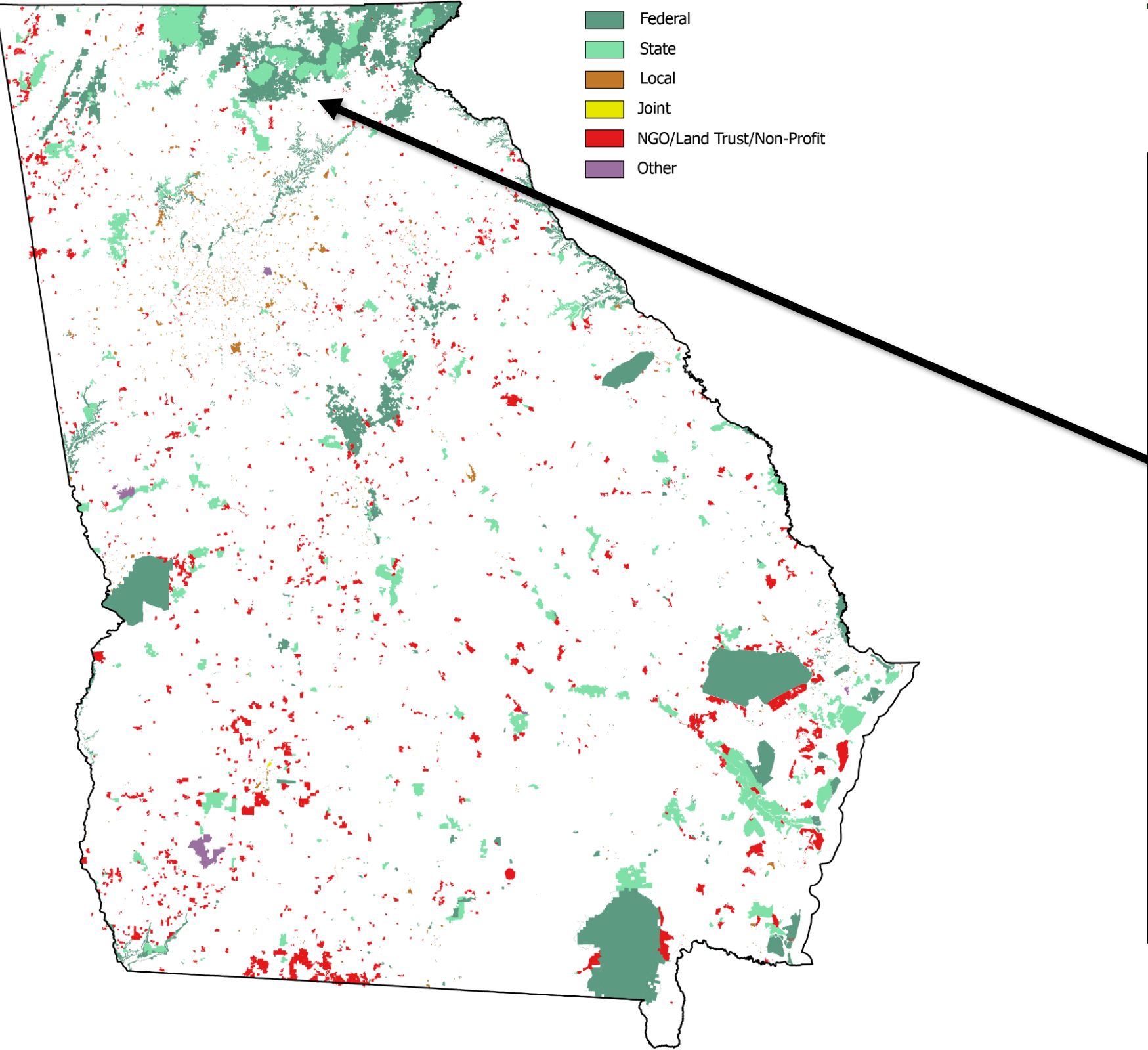
White Oak Pastures
Bluffton (Clay County)



Working Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



AGRIBUSINESS:

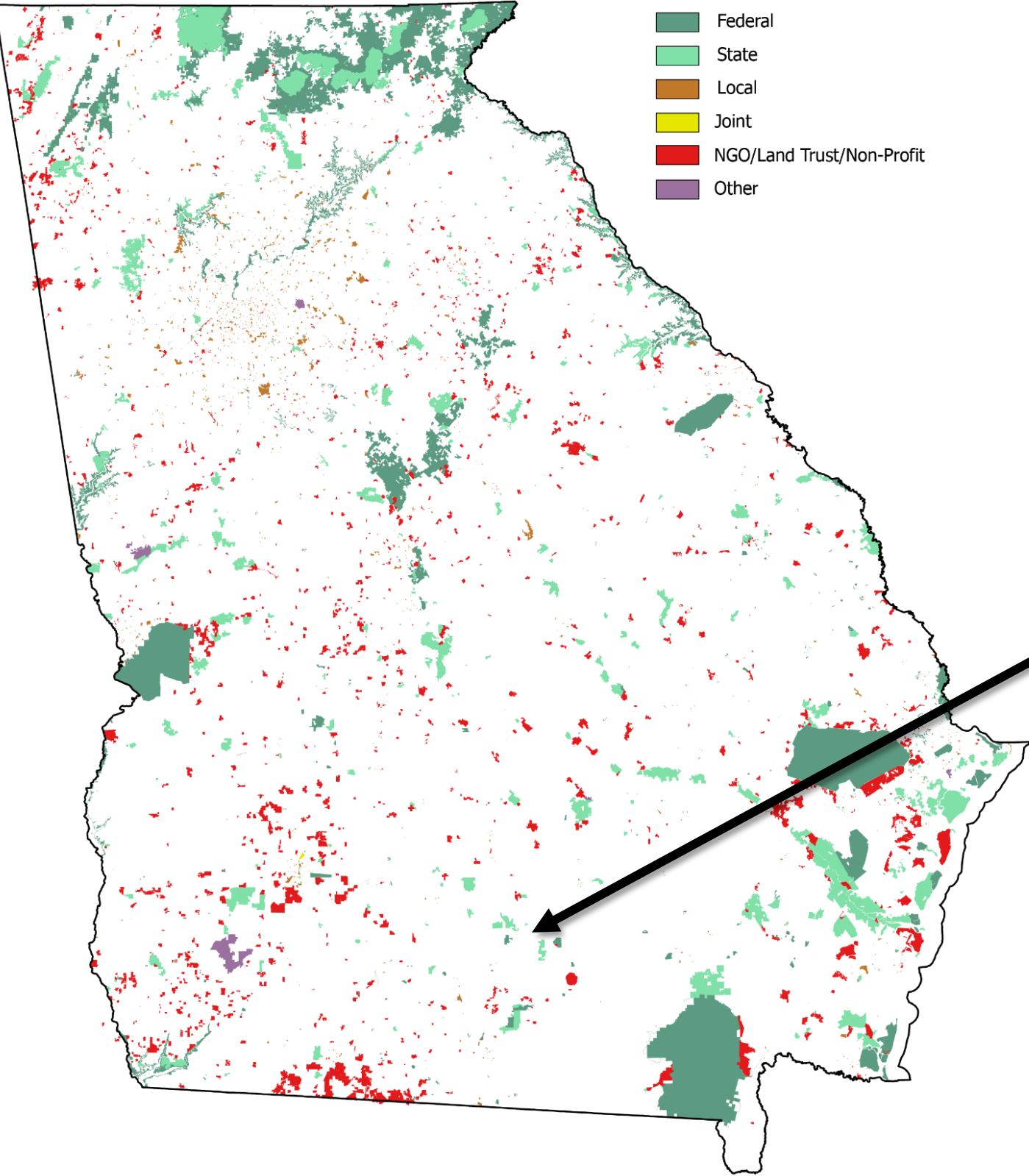
Three Sisters Winery
Dahlonega (Lumpkin County)



Working Lands in GA



CONSERVATION LANDS, 2024



FORESTRY:

Gaskins Forest Education Center
Alapaha (Berrien County)





Outdoor Economy 101

Outdoor Economic Impact



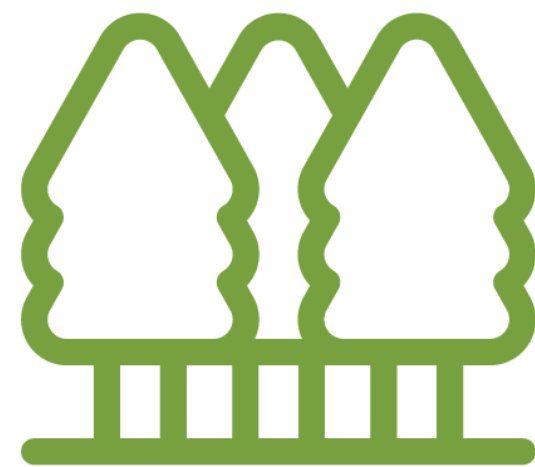
AGRIBUSINESS



\$90

BILLION
per year

FORESTRY



\$42

BILLION
per year

RECREATION



\$21

BILLION
per year

Tourism in Georgia

- Overall economic impact = **\$79.7 billion** (2023)
- Second largest economic contributor to Georgia, after agribusiness
- Linkages between agriculture, lodging, food/beverage, and recreation sales
- Total visitor spending = **\$46.3 billion** (2023)



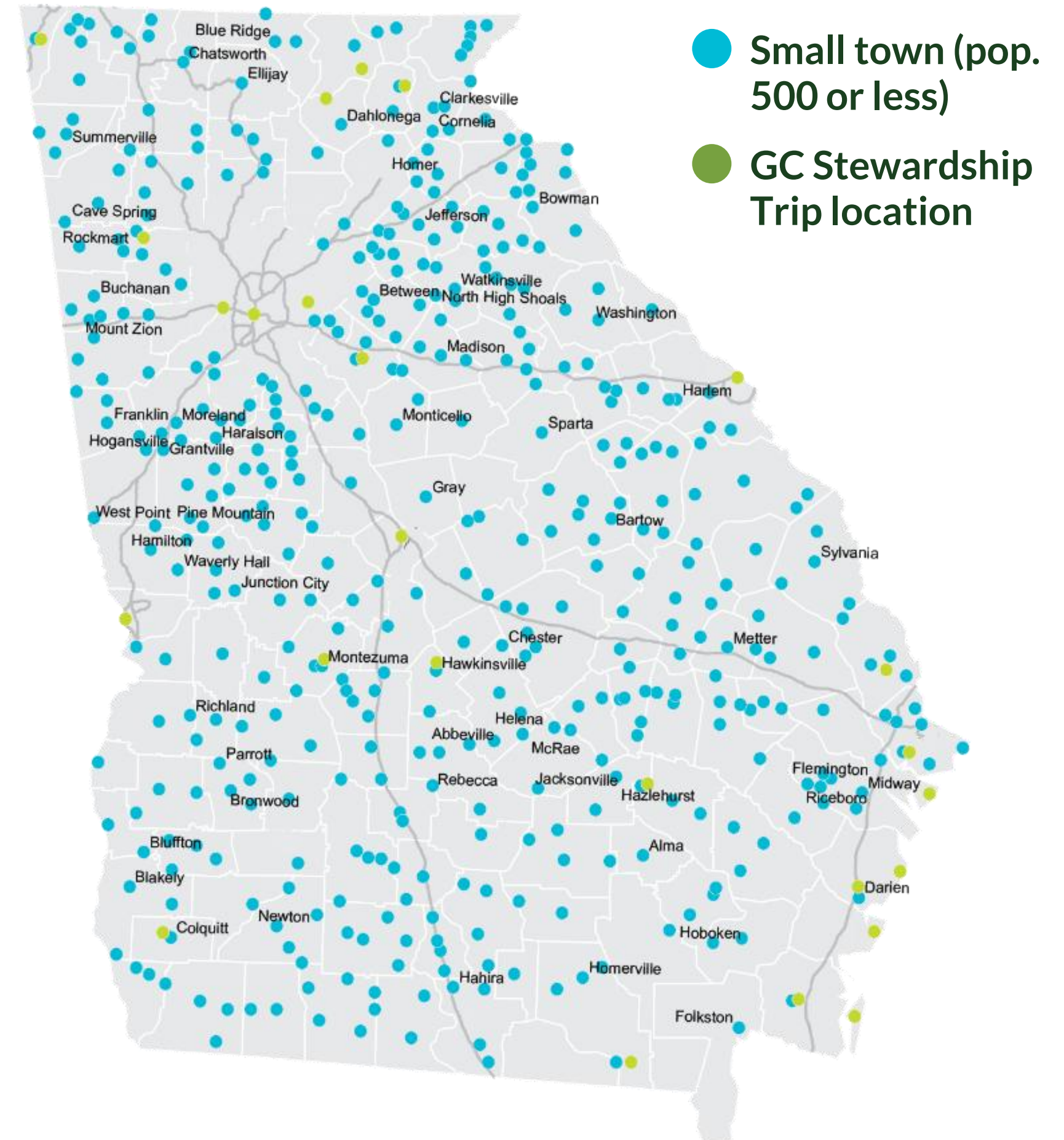
Recreation Tourism in Georgia

- Overall economic impact = **\$20.7 billion** (2025), **2.3%** of total GDP
- Boating and fishing most lucrative “traditional” activities
- Recreation spending in rural counties = **\$379.1 million** (2023)
- Total visits to Georgia State Parks = **14.1 million** (2023)



Georgia's Small Towns

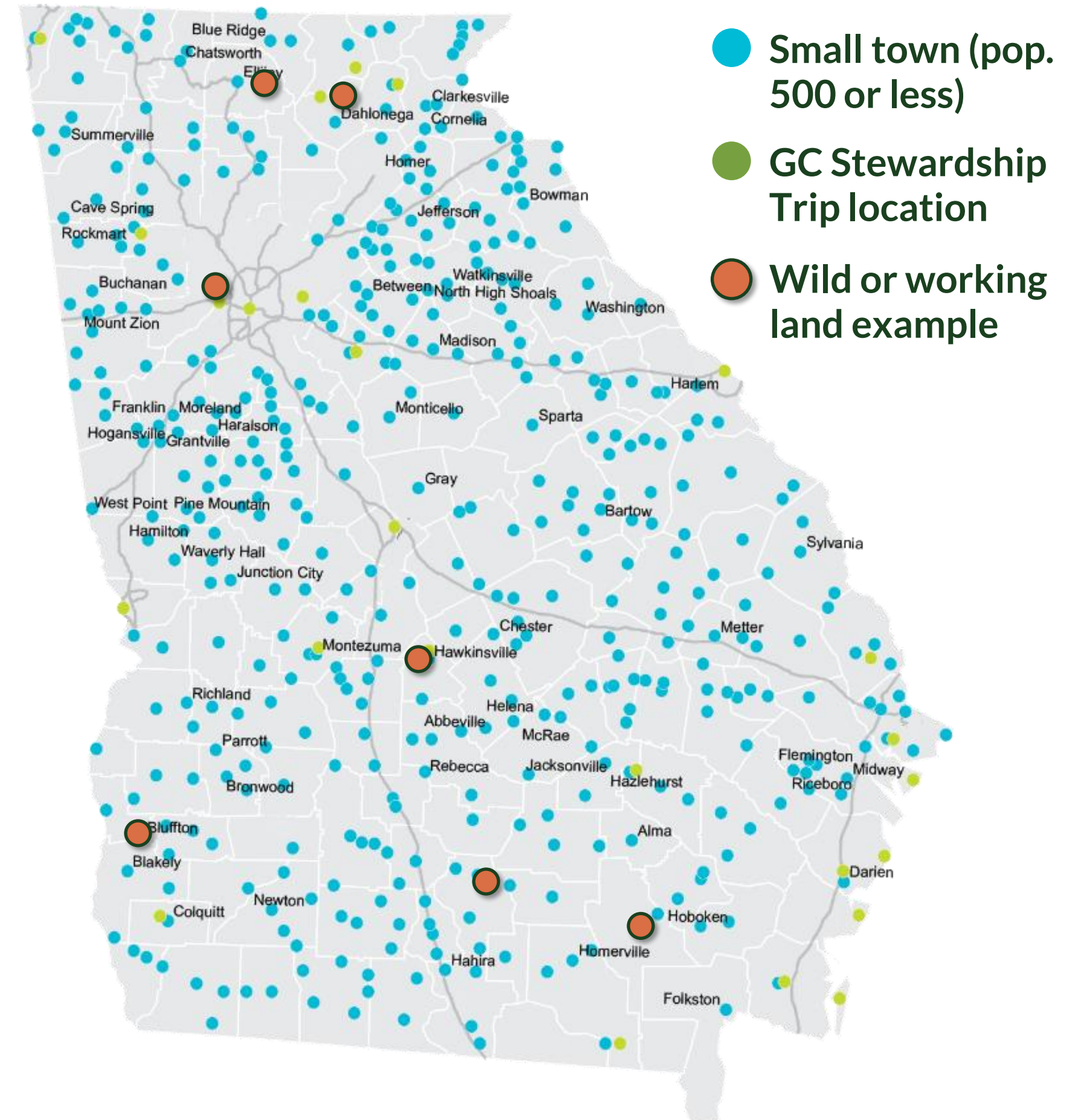
- 391 towns with population 500 or less (73% of total incorporated areas)
- Only 25% of our population lives on 92% of Georgia's land



Georgia's Small Towns

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- Only 25% of our population lives on 92% of Georgia's land

If we overlay our examples from earlier...



Challenges for Small Towns



Barriers to education



Overseas competition for low-skill manufacturing



Loss of mid-sized farms and family farms



Loss of agricultural employment



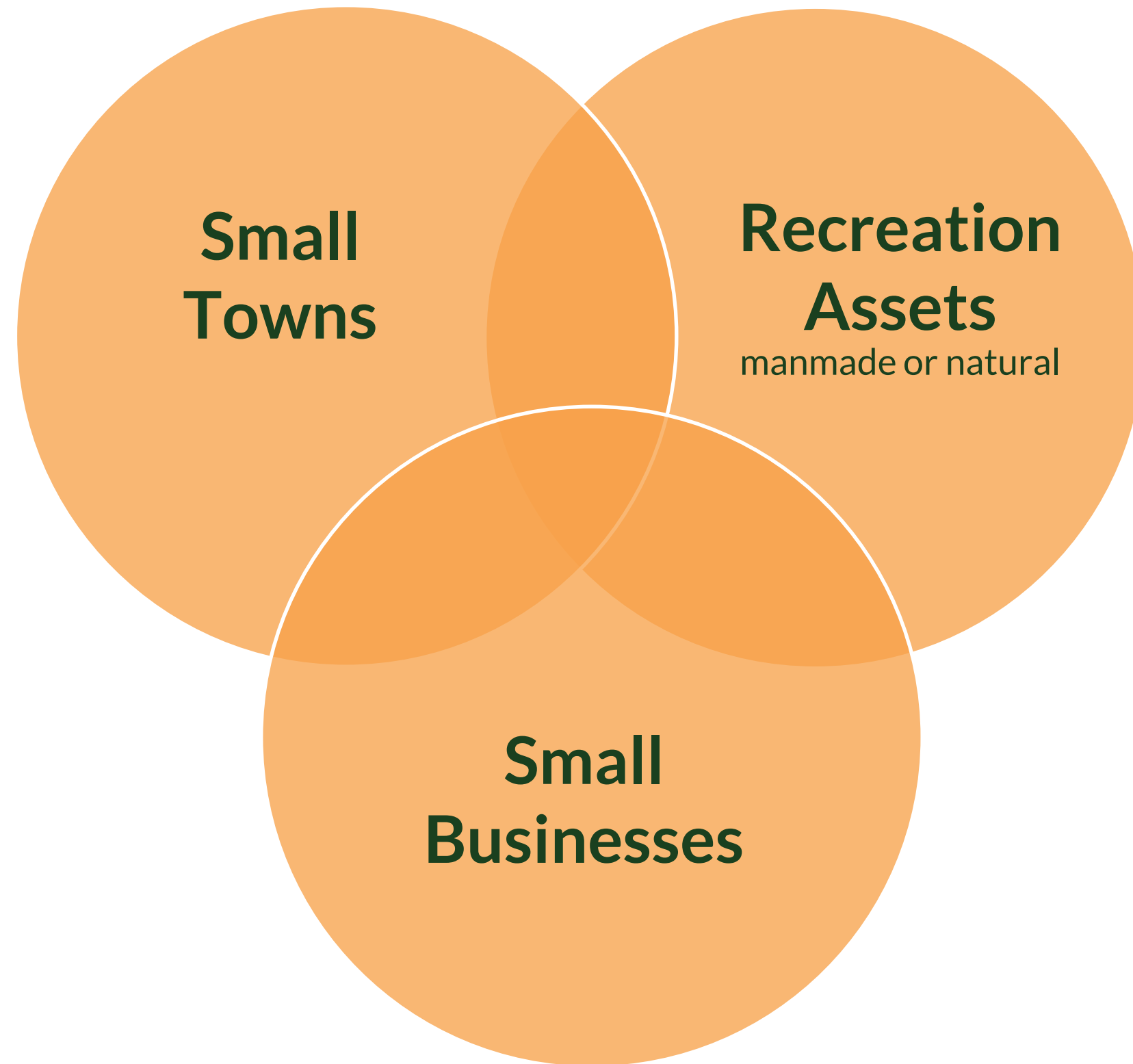
Lack of planners and resources



Exodus of youth/brain drain



Where to Invest



Outdoor recreation can help stabilize small towns and rural areas—
and keep our landscapes and working lands intact.





Case Studies



Welcome to...

Darien, GA

Population: 1,747

Area: 21 square miles

Downtown: 4 blocks

Closest large city: Savannah

Assets:

- Waterfront park, well programmed and celebrated
- Historic storefronts, clustered on Broad Street
- Local restaurants
- Future connection to East Coast Greenway
- “Jumping off point” for barrier island excursions
- Historic downtown grid (Oglethorpe design)



Welcome to... *Clarkesville, GA*

Population: 1,911

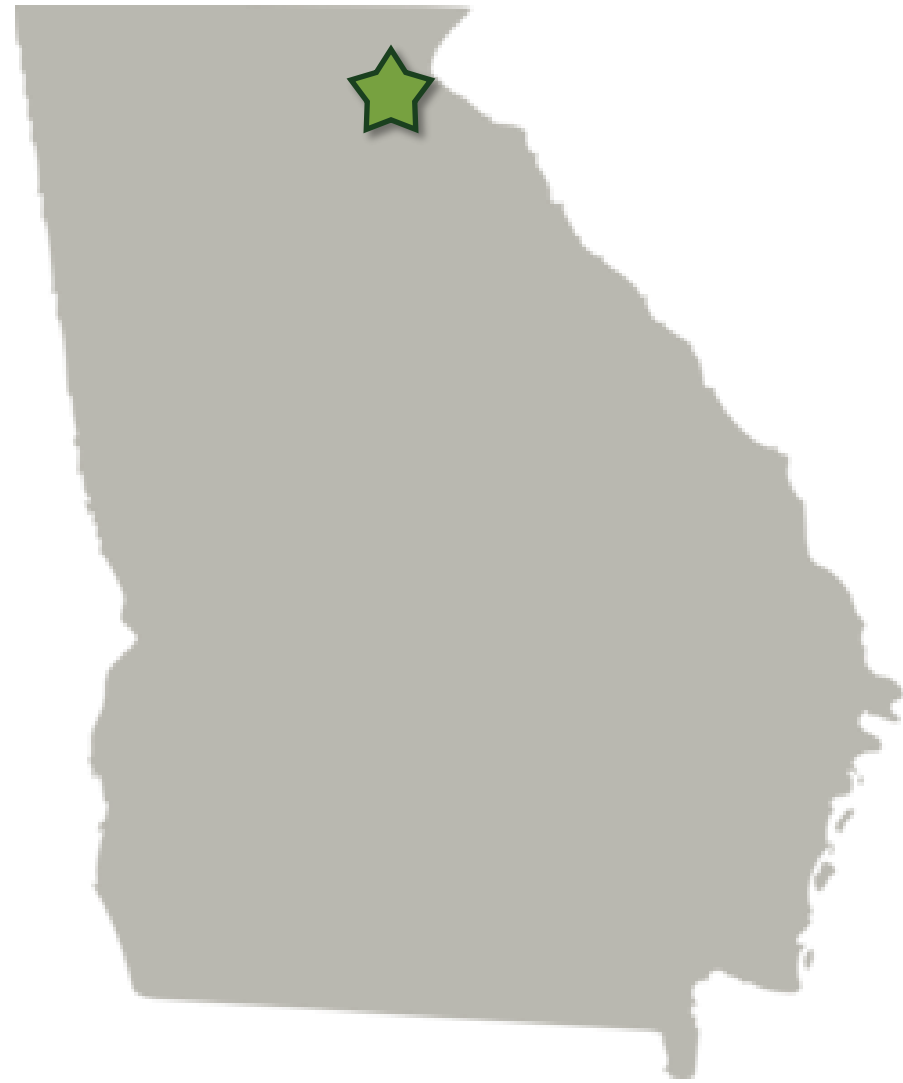
Area: 2.5 square miles

Downtown: 11 blocks

Closest city: Gainesville

Assets:

- Headwaters of the Soquee River
- Proximity to Tallulah Gorge, Chattahoochee National Forest, and many other outdoor rec locations
- Fly-fishing destination
- Strong downtown form
- Wetlands park in town



Welcome to... *Thomasville, GA*

Population: 18,881

Area: 15 square miles

Downtown: 16-18 blocks

Closest city: Valdosta /
Tallahassee, FL

Assets:

- Farm-to-table capital of Georgia
- Hunting, fishing, boating opps in Red Hills Region
- Well-designed downtown
- Active city governance and investment in community programming
- Regional connections to major metros



IMAGE SOURCES: SOUTHERN LIVING, TALL TIMBERS

Welcome to... *Dahlonega, GA*

Population: 7,537

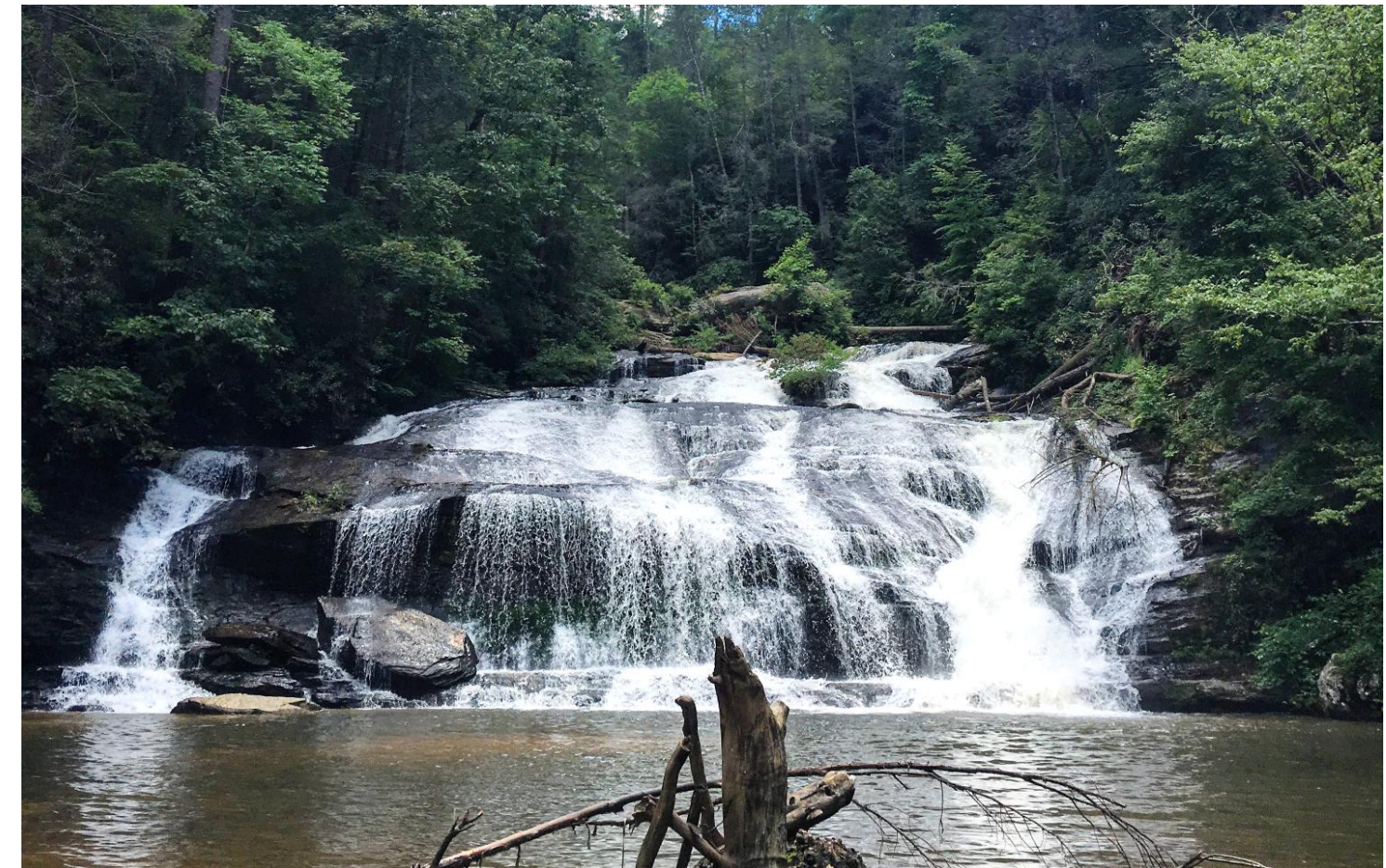
Area: 8.8 square miles

Downtown: 14 blocks

Closest city: Gainesville

Assets:

- Proximity to Chattahoochee National Forest and privately managed recreation opportunities
- Incredible viewsheds
- Agritourism / local winery hotspot
- Local university



Welcome to... *Carrollton, GA*

Population: 26,738

Area: 22.5 square miles

Downtown: 10-12 blocks

Closest city: Atlanta

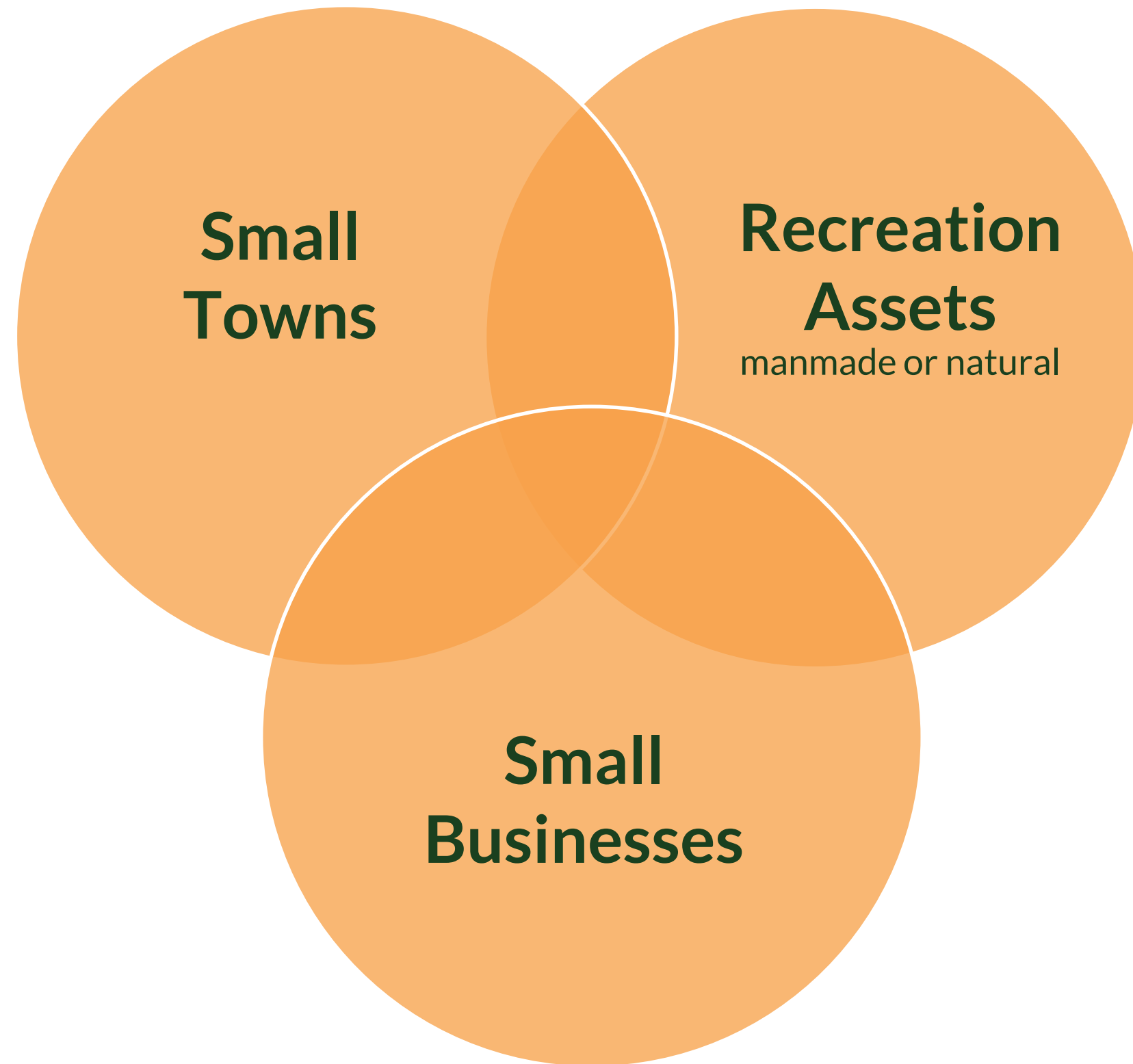
Assets:

- Carrollton Greenbelt, a circular network of trails with spurs into downtown and up to Silver Comet
- 25 miles from Chattahoochee Bend State Park, 35 from Talladega National Forest in AL
- Robust downtown retail and dining district
- Local performing arts center



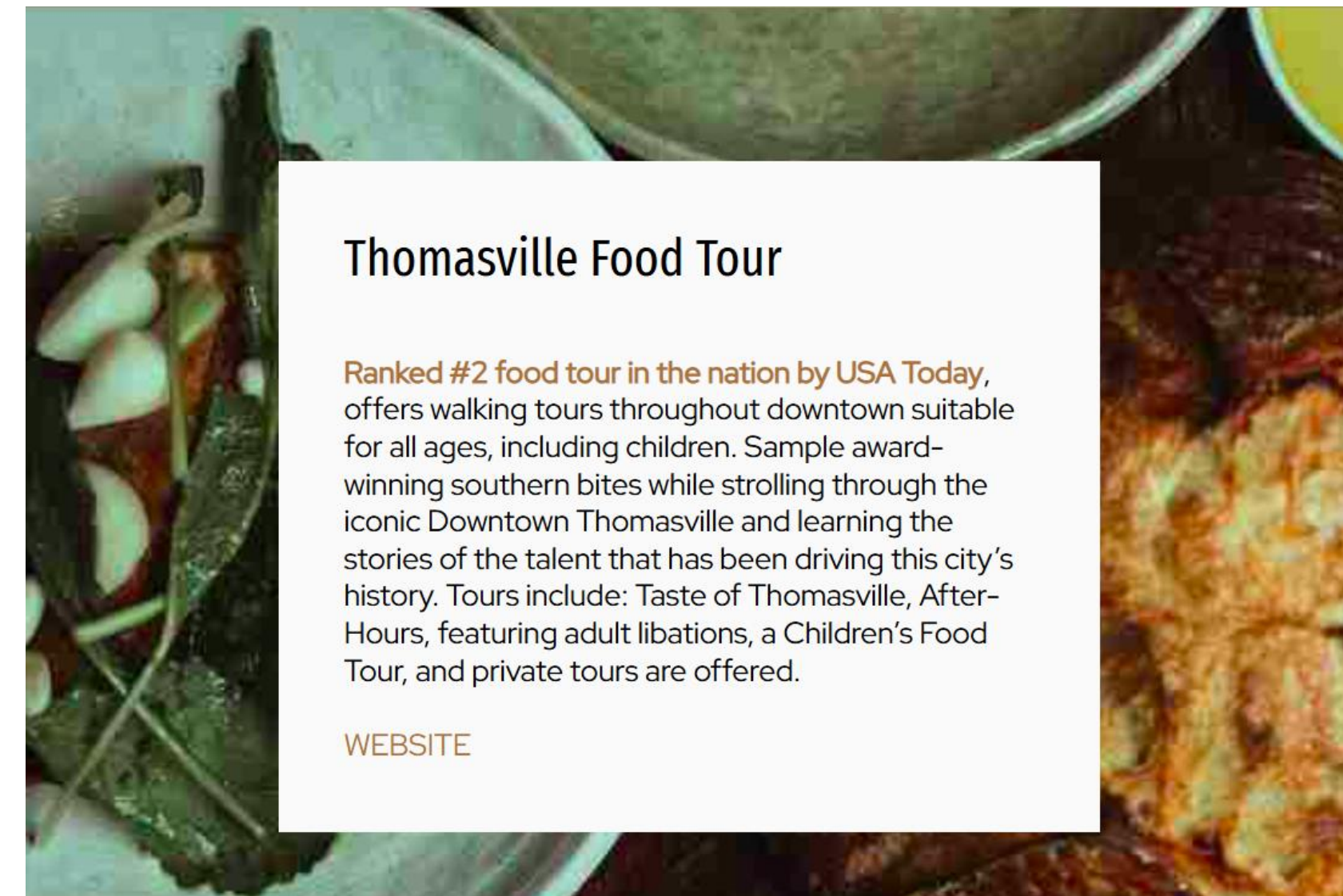
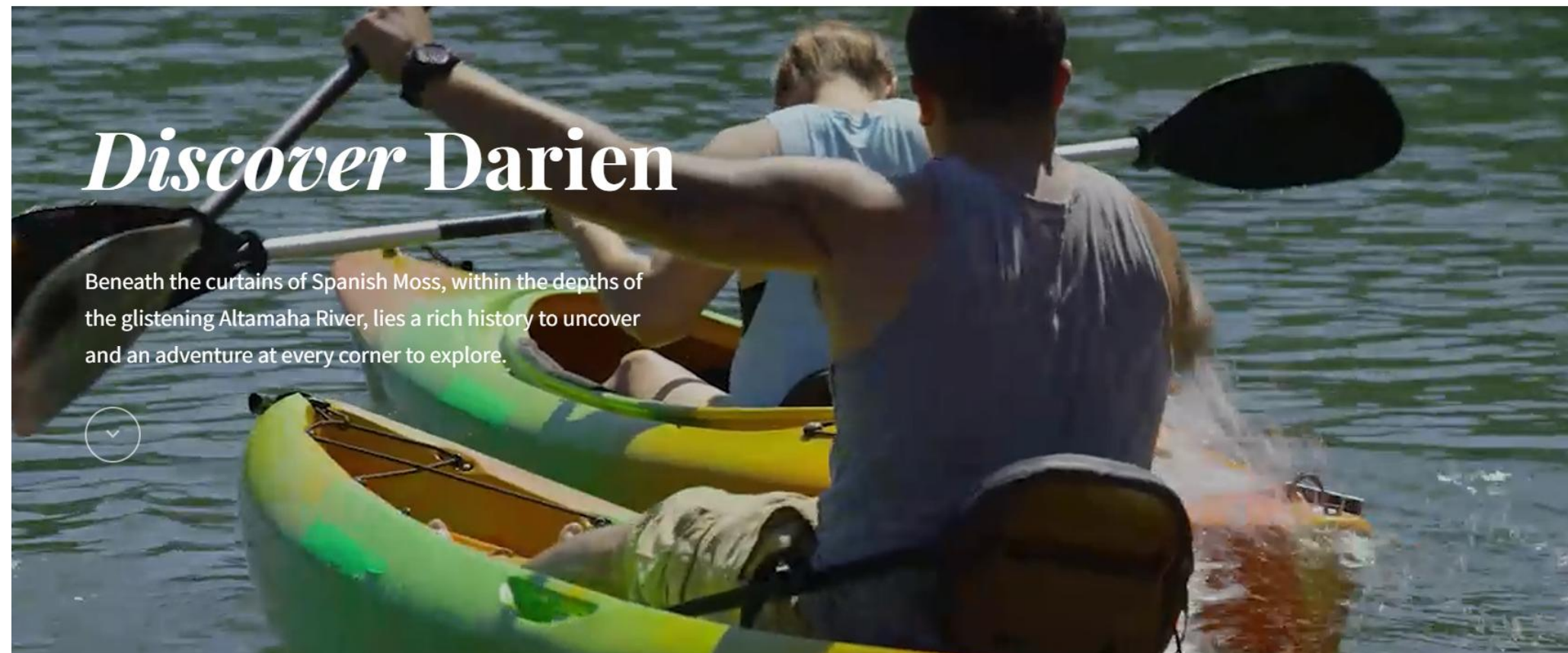
IMAGE SOURCE: CITY OF CARROLLTON

Where to Invest



Where to Invest

1 *Identify what makes you special – and showcase it through branding*



Where to Invest

2

Conservation partners (like land trusts) can open access and formalize recreation opportunities



**Conservation. Recreation.
Community.**

PHOTO: BALD MOUNTAIN CREEK NATURE PRESERVE

[SE TRUST PROPERTIES](#)

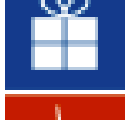
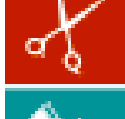


Where to Invest

3

Support the outdoor economy by investing in other downtown development staples

SOURCE: DOWNTOWN THOMASVILLE, SHOPPING AND DINING GUIDE

	MAP OF DOWNTOWN	3-4
	ANTIQUES	5
	APPAREL, JEWELRY, SHOES AND ACCESSORIES	6-8
	ART GALLERIES	8
	BOOKS AND MUSIC	9
	CHILDREN	9
	FOOD AND DRINKS	10-12
	HOME DECOR AND GIFTS	13-14
	SALONS AND BARBERS	14-15
	SPAS, HEALTH AND BEAUTY	15-16
	SPECIALTY	16-17
	YARN, FABRIC, CRAFT AND SEWING	17
	ANNUAL EVENTS	18



Questions



Thank You

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