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Russell Creek Reservoir – Dawson County, Georgia

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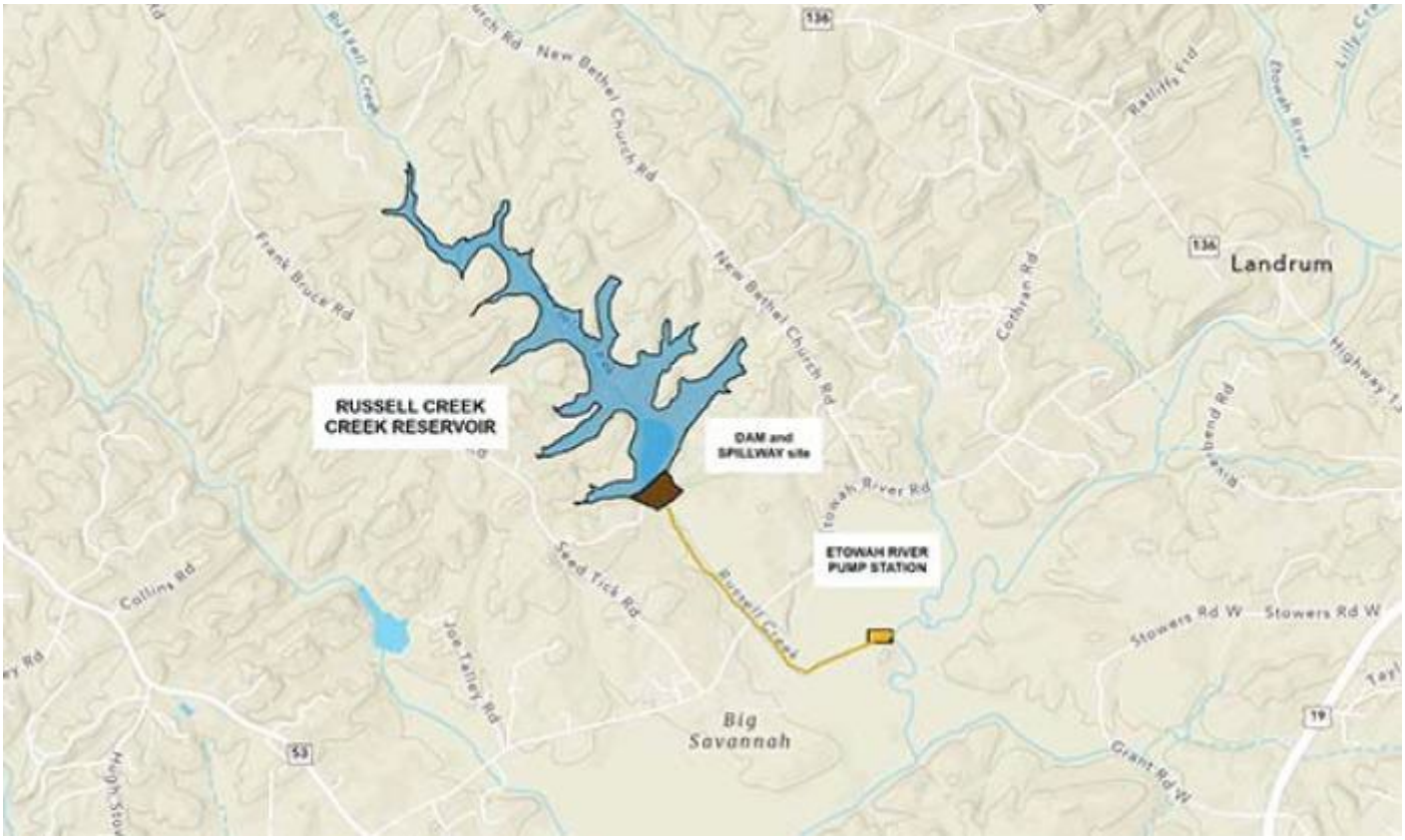
Rivers rarely flow in a straight line, instead they meander, twist and turn depending on a variety of influences, confluences and obstacles along the way. The process for implementing a watershed project plan is similar as they face challenges from planning through construction.



The Russell Creek Reservoir in Dawson County, Georgia, is a living example of what it takes to safeguard growing communities and preserve vital resources for their future. Right now, partners – including USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – are working together to transform a dam into a reservoir to protect a community for the long-term, helping prevent flooding and ensuring water during times of drought.

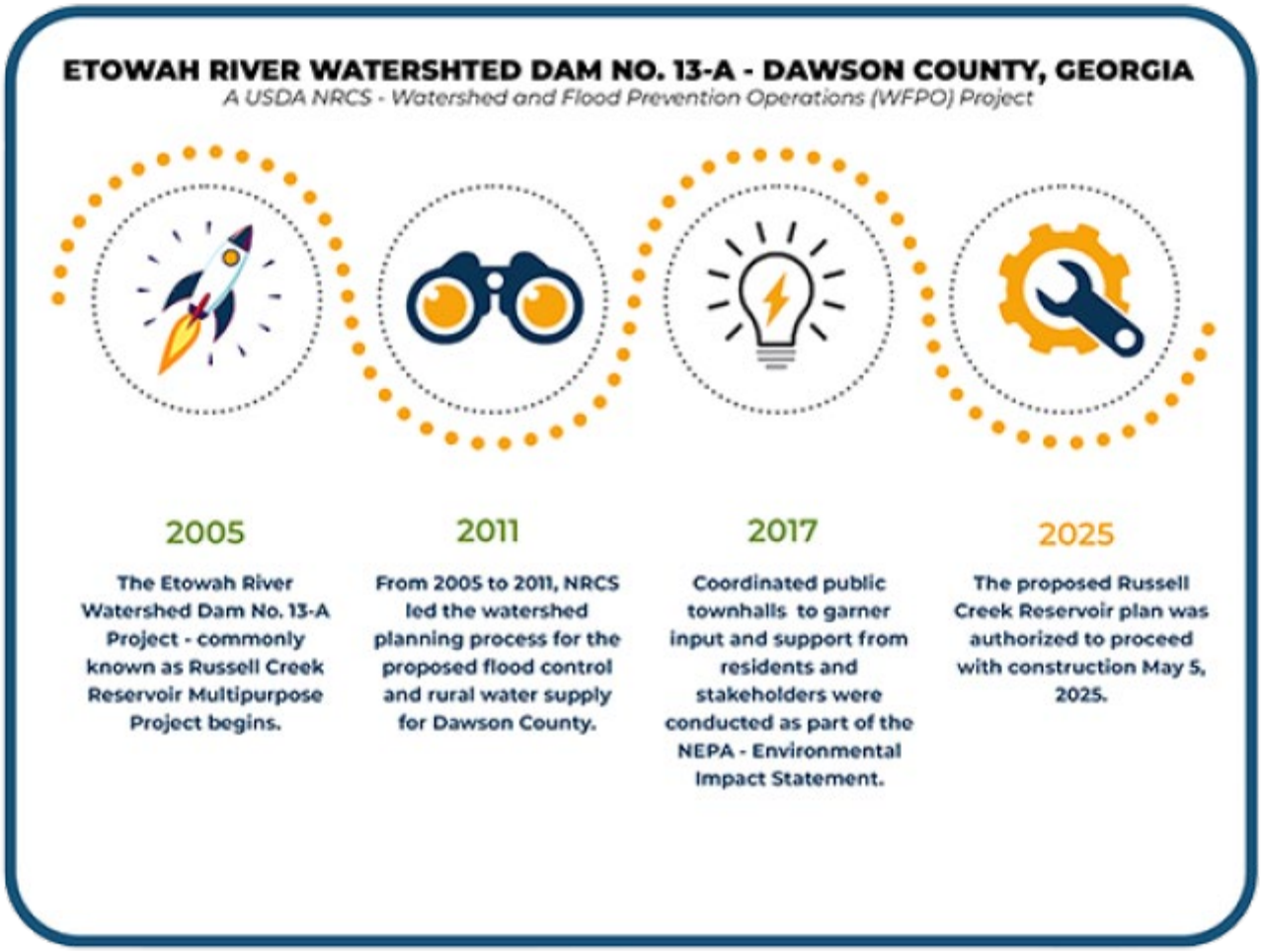
The current dam, also known as Etowah River Dam Number 13, was built in 1957 and does not store enough water to meet current demands for the increased needs of the growing population. As more people discover Dawson County, the area has witnessed a surge in development downstream. An increase in development also raises the risk factor of the original dam from low-hazard to a high-hazard potential dam. Meaning that in the event of a breach, lives and property would be at risk. The new reservoir, as designed, is being constructed to meet modern, stringent dam safety and performance criteria.

Construction Progress

Last spring, over 200 people gathered on April 17th, 2025, to witness the groundbreaking for the Russell Creek Reservoir Multi-Purpose project funded by NRCS through the Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations (WFPO) program. Over $68 million of WFPO assistance has been invested.

Current and retired NRCS Georgia staff and local sponsors who have worked on the Russell Creek Reservoir watershed plan L-R: Jimmy Bramblett (Retired NRCS and current GA Association of Conservation Districts NACD Representative, Lower Chattahoochee River Conservation District Supervisor), Eric Harris (NRCS State Watershed Rehabilitation Engineer), Cran Upshaw (NRCS State Economist), Sharon Swagger (NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Easements and Water Resources), Brooke Anderson (General Manager Etowah Water & Sewer Authority), Mark Hall (NRCS State Geologist), Terrance Rudolph (NRCS State Conservationist, Niki Crews (NRCS State Cultural Resources & NEPA Coordinator), Krisha Whiting (NRCS Natural Resources Specialist / Easements & Water Resources), Megan Seidel (NRCS Watershed Programs Coordinator) , Diane Guthrie (NRCS State Conservation Engineer), Tim Collins (Assistant General Manager, Etowah Water & Sewer Authority. *Photo credit: NRCS-Georgia.*

NRCS celebrated the historic efforts of the project sponsor, the Etowah Water and Sewer Authority, for their perseverance and commitment that continue to make this landmark undertaking possible—a legacy moment that celebrated many years of planning, environmental review and design to provide a reliable source of water during periods of drought to the citizens of Dawson County.



Russell Creek Reservoir Timeline. Courtesy of the Etowah Sewer and Water Authority.

Currently, the site area is being prepared which includes clearing, removing underground vegetation (grubbing), stripping and excavating the area. This process creates a clean, stable, and graded foundation for the dam and reservoir basin. Etowah Water and Sewer Authority expect to complete construction in three years, followed by one year to fill the reservoir fully.

Perseverance - Partnerships and Collaboration

“Building a reservoir for our future, is a big deal and, takes a lot of time, commitment and transparency from all federal agencies and stakeholders to ensure every detail is considered,” said Brooke Anderson, General Manager of Etowah Water and Sewer Authority.” It’s important to integrate the process and policy of these agencies with any watershed-scale project.”

Artist's rendering of Russell Creek Reservoir Project. Courtesy of the Etowah Sewer and Water Authority

NRCS-Georgia's multi-disciplinary approach established a core team of technical experts from engineering, cultural resources and water resources to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Georgia State Historic Preservation, Georgia Environmental Protection Division, and others. These project partners and NRCS specialists established an effective communication framework to enhance ongoing collaboration—crucial for achieving a successful design outcome and moving the project forward.

Endurance – Project Benefits

The reality of any watershed-scale project is considering what would happen if the project isn't done and the impacts it would have on a prosperous community.

"Water sets up everything else," Anderson said. "If you don't have water, there's no point to have anything else. Quality of life is better with water and further enhanced by doing a project such as this. If we had quit at any point along the way, we would have quit our community. We couldn't quit and give up on the community we serve."

Once completed, the project will serve as a template for future NRCS dam reconstructions to enhance drought resilience through innovation and collaboration. Over its lifespan, the new reservoir will continue to emulate what local and federal entities can achieve when they work together to create a sustainable future for communities threatened by water scarcity.

Witness the transformation of Etowah River Watershed Dam 13A into the Russell Creek Reservoir through our immersive "Groundbreaking" multimedia story.