

The mighty freshwater mussel: An unassuming part of Georgia Power's conservation story

THURSDAY, JUNE 16, 2016 – Tony Dodd knows all about mussels and how to protect them when the company comes into contact with them during routine electrical system maintenance or new construction.

It's an important role because Dodd and other environmental specialists are challenged everyday to ensure the company helps Georgia maintain one of the most diverse and abundant assemblages of mussels found anywhere in the world.

"Mussels are extremely important to the ecosystem," said Dodd, an environmental specialist with Georgia Power's natural resources group. "The presence of diverse and abundant native mussels in our waterways indicates watershed well-being. When considering awareness of large-scale ecosystem health, it's remarkable that such obscure bottom-dwelling creatures can provide so much information."

More than 300 freshwater mussel species are native to North America and 126 species are historically known in Georgia alone, Dodd said. But unfortunately, under the legal protections of Environmental Species Act, 13 mussel species are listed as endangered, meaning it is in danger of becoming extinct in all or significant portions of its range, in the state. Three mussel species in Georgia are federally listed as threatened, meaning the species is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future.



Dodd and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources malacologist, Todd Fobian surveying mussels



Pyganodon cataracta - The Eastern Floater.

Dodd and other company biologists overseeing compliance needs, work closely with regional regulators and malacologists (mussel biologists) whose concern is to assess and update the status of mussels.

"Where protected species might occur, we consult with agencies and survey for the species of concern, if necessary, to avoid potential impacts and to ensure we comply with ESA," said Dodd.

For added concern, biologists and malacologists also have to take into account habitat alterations that affect fish populations can also affect freshwater mussels. A mussel's successful life cycle requires the presence of certain fish species as intermediate parasitic hosts for the microscopic mussel larvae.

"Freshwater mussels and host fish species are a valuable component of the state's natural resources and we are committed to being good stewards of that resource," said Dodd. "Our work as biologists put us in a unique position to aid species biodiversity and the health of our waterways for future years to come."