Sci4Ga's 2022 Legislative RoundUp

1 Introduction

The Georgia General Assembly meets for 40 days from Jan to Apr every year, with each session spanning a two-year cycle. The latest session, 2021-2022, wrapped up in April of 2022.

During the summer break of 2021, Science for Georgia released a Legislative Scorecard, tracking significant bills, some of which were still active going into 2022. Now that the 2021-22 session has wrapped, it's time to reflect on positive and negative things that occurred and look forward to the 2023-24 session.

Science for Georgia is a non-profit, 501c3, dedicated to bridging the gap between scientists and the public through training, outreach opportunities, and direct contact with the public, policymakers, and the press. Science for Georgia highlights how science mpact people's lives and advocates for the responsible use of science in public policy.

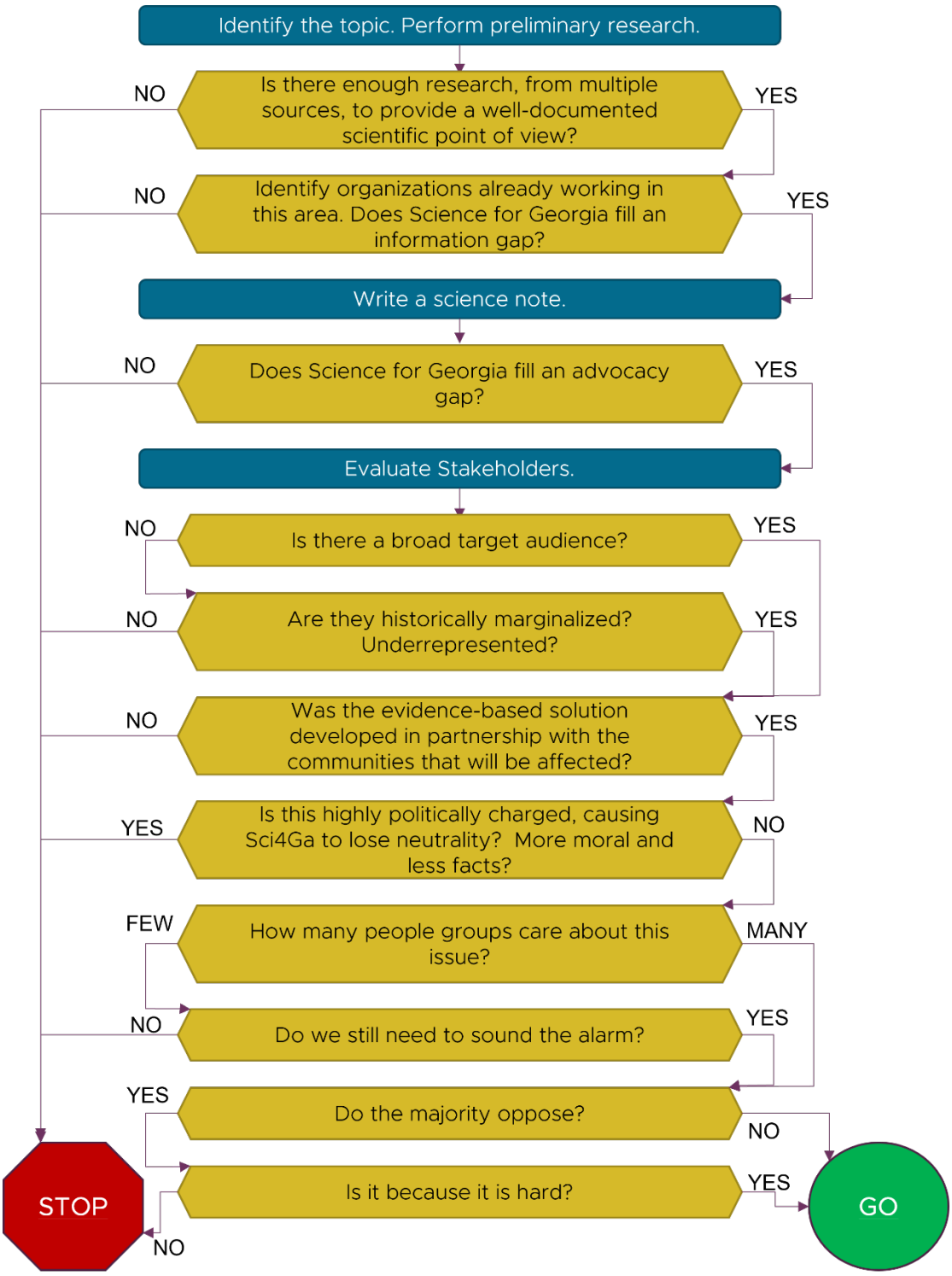
For the core-issues that we choose to focus on, we aim to provide an overall summary of the science and to identify evidence-based actions that can turn vicious cycles into virtuous cycles. We educate and advocate around both personal and policy actions that can have an impact. For example, composting can reduce greenhouse gas emissions – individuals can sign up for compost programs, but policy changes are needed to support large-scale adoption. Reading to a child 15 minutes a day can improve their literacy, but policy changes are needed to break the cycle of multi-generational illiteracy.

Science for Georgia is a non-profit, and as such, we can provide information about issues and legislation, but we do not endorse specific candidates. Each year, we strive to provide information about "what the science says" about specific pieces of legislation and specific issues. We cannot advocate for science around every issue; thus, we can provide a surface-level overview around many topics as they come to the forefront of discussion. For core-issues we seek input in facilitating the process of drafting or evaluating legislation, ensuring that at each step of the legislative process the most relevant and up-to-date science and data are considered.

We choose our core issues to advocate for based on input from the partners, the community, and our Board of Directors. This document will outline how Science for Georgia understands which issues to advocate for, our advocacy methods, and an overview of our core advocacy issues and how they fared in the Georgia General Assembly, with the purpose of enabling the reader to provide input on topics they think are important to Georgia.

2 Decision Process

Science for Georgia utilizes a multi-step decision making checklist to evaluate topics of interest to understand if we should get involved in a discussion and how we can best contribute.



3 Advocacy Method

Once we have identified topics and solutions of interest, we implement a "convene, collaborate, and activate" strategy where we work with stakeholders through an iterative process to implement actionable changes.

Convene. First, we hold a forum to learn from a diverse set of experts about the topic of interest. We strive to hear from academics, businesses, and community leaders. Speakers provide an overview of the topic from their point of view and are asked to conclude with "If you could wave a magic wand – what solution would you implement in Georgia?" This question sparks next-steps discussions and prompts action-oriented thinking.

Collaborate. Second, we host a closed-door roundtable with stakeholders to identify actionable solutions. Here, attendees are charged with identifying at most **three** high-impact, pragmatic solutions.

There are typically many solutions to a given problem, but as time and resources are limited, it is best to focus on big levers of change, those that can take a vicious cycle and turn it around into a virtuous cycle.

Pragmatism can be accessed via the cost, scalability, and measurement.

1. Cost - Evaluate the monetary, human, and environmental cost on a scale of cost vs. return on investment. For the human cost – impact on jobs / wages, human health, living standards, safety, education, ability to have food, shelter, and water, etc. For environmental cost – impact on the environment, habitat loss, emission of greenhouse gases, loss of carbon sinks, loss of natural barriers, etc.
2. Scalability - if a pilot program or solution works – it is replicable to similar populations or areas?
3. Measurement - Are there given metrics to measure success, and can we easily measure or access those metrics?

Activate. Third, based on the roundtable results, we inform the public via a website and social media that explains the situation, provides background research, and most importantly, lays out the action-oriented solutions and everyone can be involved. From here we work with stakeholders to raise awareness of solutions that require policy change with policymakers.

We continually assess what has occurred and iterate on solution-sets.

This strategy yielded results in two areas in 2021-22. The Edu & Workforce Series resulted in the GA General Assembly Study Committee on Literacy Instruction, which we are supporting through background research and coordination of community input. Our Food Insecurity Roundtable informed legislation and the creation of a (in-progress) Food Security Helpdesk hosted by the GA Dept of Agriculture.

4 Overview of Core-Issues

In 2020 our first cadre of interns explored issues related to healthy water systems, healthy food cycles, and workforce preparedness. Since that time, these explorations have morphed into two major areas – Environmental Health and Education & Workforce.

4.1 Environmental Health

From water to food to land – supply, access, and utilization impacts our health, our lives, the economy, and the environment. This interconnectedness is studied via a board scientific area referred to an environmental health.

In general, it was not a good year for evidence-based environmental health bills in the Georgia General Assembly. Most of the bills that would have grown environmental health protections failed.

And a few bills that were not evidence-based did fail. Namely, providing a tax exemption for bitcoin miners (HB 1342) and a weakening of the Coastal Marshlands Protection Act (HB 748).

4.1.1 Evidence-based environmental health bills that passed:

Summary	**Bill Number**
The Childhood Lead Exposure Control Act (HB 1355) which updated and revise provisions for lead exposure to comply with federal guidelines	HB 1355
A resolution commending the recycling industry	HR 114
Food security - renaming of 'SNAP' to 'Georgia Grown Farm to Food Bank Program' (SB 296), which encourages food in food banks to be purchased from GA Farmers and requires annual reporting of where food was purchased from	SB 296
Creation of a development authority for farmer's markets	HB 676

4.1.2 Evidence-based environmental health bills that failed:

Category	**Bills of Note**
Increased permitting requirements and scientific study on historically marginalized neighborhoods that are particularly at high risk from environmental threats including new facilities	HB 339 HB 431 HB 432 HB 3
Prohibit mining near the Okefenokee Swamp	HB 1289
Ensure proper Coal Ash disposal and storage – in early 2022 the EPA stepped-in and is attempting to force compliance with federal regulations – so this is moving out of the General Assembly and into the courts	HB 176 HB 647 SB 230

Expand / Encourage Distributed Energy Systems (i.e. roof top solar – which is currently capped at 5,000 users by GA Power)	HB 1083 HB 1491 HB 1494 SB 299 SB 583
Alternate Fuel Vehicles – bills to encourage use and infrastructure. While good, there is legitimate concern that without revenue from gas taxes or utility recovery, GA will be unable fund highway and EV infrastructure. These bills failed, in part, because the balance has not yet been found.	HB 1322 SB 492 SB 513
Waste Reduction: understanding where waste goes, limiting single-use plastics, limiting e-waste	HR 223 HB 1176 SB 104 SB 224
Landfill Zoning – tighten regulations	HB 557 HB 1272 HB 1338
Require Local Water & Sewer Authority Board Members to take annual training	HB 1381
Create a Food Security Recommendation Council	SB 537
Soil amendments must encourage crop growth	HB 1548

4.1.3 Non-evidence-based environmental health bills that passed

Category	**Bills of Note**
Bans on power hookup bans (i.e. a local city cannot ban gas hookups to new construction)	HB 150
Weakening of soil amendment protections near waterways	SB 260
Enable year-round culling of racoons	HB 1147
Freedom to Farm Act – weakened current protections of small and medium farmers and existing property owners	HB 1150
Enable sale of unpasteurized milk	HB 1175

4.2 Education & Workforce

Education was a highly charged subject this year. There were several bills related to Critical Race Theory and Parental Choice. These bills were highly polarized and fell outside of our rubric for analysis.

Two study committees of note did pass. One was HR 650 – the creation of a House Study Committee on Literacy Instruction. This idea was influenced by Science for Georgia's Education and Workforce Speaker Series and Roundtable. We are currently involved with the committee and gathering community information.

The other was SR650 to create Senate Study Committee to Revise Education Funding Mechanisms. This committee is examining the Quality Basic Education (QBE) Act, which is a law from 1985 that helps balance school funding between districts. Learn more about QBE here.

SB 397 passed – which updated the terminology around GEDs to now be called 'High School Equivalency.'

4.2.1 Education Bills of Note that Failed

Category	Bill Number
Enable individuals without a High School Diploma to get a diploma – not an equivalency	SB 231
Examine QBE, with emphasis on students living in poverty	HB 10
Increase grants to isolated rural schools	HB 118
Certify schools in whole child model	HB 201
Raise mandatory education age to 17 (it is currently 16)	HB 155
Make pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten attendance mandatory	HB 262

5 Healthcare

While Science for Georgia does not actively engage in health care bills (this topic is well covered by other groups), multiple bills expanded healthcare coverage, which is an evidence-based practice that increases well-being.

Subject	Bill Number
Requires insurance coverage for transplants for individuals with a mental or physical disability	HB 128
Mental Health Parity Act – require coverage for mental health services, not just physical health services	HB 1013
Grant program to establish primary care medical facilities in health shortage areas	HB 1042
Require annual statistical reporting on costs, demographics, care, etc., associated with state-run medical programs	HB 1276
Expand Medicaid Coverage to 1-year post-partum	SB 338
De-criminalization of HIV exposure	SB 164

Georgia has yet to expand Medicaid coverage to recommended federal levels, which is leaving millions of federal dollars on the table. While Georgia expanded Medicaid coverage for post-partum mothers (SB 338), it did not pass a bill to do the same for those with HIV/AIDS (HB 1192). It also did not expand access to telehealth (HB 215).

Bills banning vaccine passports and mandates failed.

6 Get involved

Science for Georgia has a Science Catalyzer Network –a group of science-friendly people who want to make positive change. Throughout the year we will have volunteer and involvement opportunities including ways to advocate to make Science Matter Here.
Learn more here: https://scienceforgeorgia.org/sci4ga-catalyzer-network/