INTRODUCTION:
Georgia’s more than 50 municipal solid waste landfills take in a lot of waste—around 40,000 tons each day—enough trash to fill a line of typical garbage trucks that would stretch for almost 20 miles. Most of it is household “solid” waste, but in recent years, these landfills have taken on more sewage sludge, the semi-solid, semi-liquid byproduct of municipal sewage treatment plants around the state. Known in the landfill business as High Moisture Content Waste (HMCW), it has proven a bugaboo for landfill operators. Once deposited, its weight and water content causes it to behave differently than ordinary solid waste, stressing the structures that contain landfill waste. In the last two years, HMCW has been blamed for slope collapses that sent leachate coursing into the Etowah River and its tributaries at two of the state’s largest landfills located in Cherokee and Forsyth counties. These incidents have prompted Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to implement stricter regulations for landfills accepting HMCW; those regulations now await approval by the Department of Natural Resources Board.

THE WATER BODY:
The Etowah River courses some 160 miles in a south, southwesterly direction from the peak of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Georgia to Rome in Northwest Georgia. Though small in stature, it is big in terms of biological diversity. It is home to 75 native species of fish and has more imperiled species (17 fish species and 16 invertebrate species) than any other river system of its size in the Southeastern United States. The federally protected Cherokee, Etowah and amber darters can be found in its mainstem and its tributaries. Dammed to form Lake Allatoona, the Etowah supplies about 10 percent of metro Atlanta’s water needs. Downstream it serves as the City of Rome’s primary water source. And, it provides countless recreational opportunities for boaters and anglers with four commercial outfitters servicing river users along the Etowah River Water Trail.
THE DIRT:

Residents in suburban Forsyth and Cherokee counties had long complained about the smells emanating from the privately-operated Eagle Point and Pine Bluff landfills, but in 2018 and 2019 when slopes at those landfills failed, opening up fissures and exposing buried waste, the stench became unbearable.

At the landfills themselves, Advanced Disposal (Eagle Point Landfill) and Waste Management of Metro Atlanta (Pine Bluff Landfill) dealt with growing crises as the fissures at the landfills allowed leachate (a mixture of water and decomposing waste) to escape to nearby creeks, wetlands and the Etowah River.

The cause of the landfill failures was traced back to too much sewage sludge or High Moisture Content Waste (HMCW). It’s like putting wet trash in a paper bag...if enough weight—and more moisture—is added to the bag, eventually the sides rupture. The problems at Eagle Point and Pine Bluff underscore the fact that many municipal solid waste landfills are not engineered to accept large amounts of HMCW.

At Eagle Point, where slope failures were first reported in 2014, the 2018 failure resulted in the operators being unable to cover waste for nearly a month.

At Pine Bluff, a 1,000-foot-long ravine formed, and it took nearly three months to stop the movement of the unstable slope and another full month to fully cover exposed waste.

Ultimately, Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) fined the landfills a combined total of $427,000 and put limits on the amount of HMCW the facilities could accept.

The sludge-induced crisis at the landfills has rippled through Georgia’s wastewater treatment facilities, causing disposal prices for sewage sludge to spike. Though alternatives exist (composting, drying, incineration and recycling as fertilizer), landfills remain the go-to sites for biosolids disposal.

In response, earlier this year, EPD initiated an update of the state’s solid waste rules. The proposed rule change would force landfills whose waste stream exceeds five percent HMCW to develop specific designs and plans to ensure that the landfill can contain the waste.

Those rules currently await review and approval by the Department of Natural Resources Board.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

The Department of Natural Resources Board should adopt the proposed change to the state’s solid waste management rules, and EPD must be funded at levels that enable the Division to effectively review High Moisture Content Waste Management Plans.

For More Information Contact:

Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman, Executive Director and Riverkeeper, Coosa River Basin Initiative, 706-232-2724, jesse@coosa.org