INTRODUCTION:
Monroe County’s Juliette is used to getting attention as the filming location for the iconic movie “Fried Green Tomatoes,” but earlier this year when toxins associated with coal ash turned up in the drinking water wells of local residents, Juliette’s name suddenly became more closely associated with coal ash and its cancer-causing toxins. Local residents responded with anger at the possibility of their water being rendered undrinkable by Georgia Power Company’s nearby Plant Scherer and the 15.7 million tons of coal ash stored there. Sporting “Save Juliette” t-shirts, they stormed the state capital with bottles of contaminated water urging Gov. Brian Kemp and legislators to do something to protect their groundwater. While residents were disappointed by inaction at the capital, the Monroe County Commission trucked in tankers filled with emergency water and set in motion a $16 million plan to extend county water lines to the area. Meanwhile, Georgia Power continues to claim there is no connection between their coal ash and contaminated wells. Rather than removing the ash to safer, lined disposal sites as it has done elsewhere, the company is holding fast to its plan to leave it where it is—in unlined pits where it is deeply submerged in groundwater and buries a portion of a creek in 80 feet of coal ash. If the company has its way, Monroe County residents will be threatened by toxins in perpetuity.

THE WATER BODY:
Formed from the Yellow, Alcovy and South Rivers that rise out of metro Atlanta, the Ocmulgee begins its life below Jackson Lake, a man-made reservoir just north of Juliette. From there, it flows some 250 miles to its confluence with the Oconee River to form the Altamaha, Georgia’s largest river. Along the river and its tributaries, some 120 communities depend upon surface or groundwater associated with the Ocmulgee, including Macon located just 15 miles downstream from Plant Scherer. A mecca for paddlers, boaters and anglers, communities along the Ocmulgee are now working to finish a 250-mile-long water trail stretching from Jackson Lake to the Altamaha River. Directly adjacent to Plant Scherer is 3,600-acre Lake Juliette which sits at the heart of the Rum Creek Wildlife Management Area. Lake Juliette is utilized by recreationists and fishermen and its water drains into the Ocmulgee River.
THE DIRT:

Problems with Georgia Power Company’s coal ash are nothing new. In fact, this is Plant Scherer’s fifth appearance in the Dirty Dozen report. Scherer’s ash pond, accumulated over nearly 40 years of burning coal at the power plant, covers more than 600 acres and holds 15.7 million tons of coal ash—enough coal ash to fill 4,700 Olympic sized swimming pools.

Efforts to force Georgia Power to properly dispose of and store its coal ash are also nothing new. Both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have tried. Most recently, legislators introduced bills during the 2020 session that would require coal ash to be disposed of in lined landfills. Despite the pleas from Juliette residents, these bills did not receive even a hearing, though legislators did allocate $500,000 to EPD for additional testing.

Without legislative intervention, it appears the coal ash at Scherer will remain. That’s because Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has signaled that it will approve Georgia Power’s proposed plan to close Scherer’s ash pond. That plan involves dewatering and then capping the pond, leaving much of the waste in unlined pits submerged in groundwater with the former channel of Berry Creek passing through the waste.

The storage site at Scherer is so unsuitable that it would be illegal to construct a new municipal solid waste landfill there today, even if it had a liner and a leachate collection system.

The plan for the water that’s pumped from the coal ash pond is also problematic. That water will be treated and released to the Ocmulgee River just miles upstream from the City of Macon’s drinking water withdrawal. The monitoring and treatment requirements outlined in the plan could expose Macon’s water to contaminants.

Meanwhile residents of Juliette fret over their well water which has been found to contain dangerous elements associated with coal ash and continue to rely on the county’s emergency tankers and other bottled water. Monroe County’s plan to spend more than $16 million to extend county water lines to Juliette is not expected to be fully completed for another year.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

EPD, which reviews Georgia Power’s coal ash pond closure plans, should require Georgia Power to excavate the coal ash at Plant Scherer and remove it to safe, lined landfills away from state waters and require more stringent monitoring of waste streams coming from the facility. If EPD fails to require safe disposal of coal ash at these sites, state legislators must step in to protect the state’s drinking water sources in our rivers and groundwater by adopting legislation that treats this highly dangerous material at least as stringently as household garbage such as coffee grounds and banana peels. Legislators need to take action now to prevent damage to the Juliette community, not wait until after the fact, making the residents “canaries in the coal mine.”

For More Information Contact:
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Top: Georgia Power Company’s Plant Scherer is among the largest coal-fired power plants in the country. In operation since the early 1980s, it now stores 15.7 million tons of coal ash. Above: The aerial view shows the extent of Plant Scherer’s ash pond. The storage area covers some 600 acres and portions of the coal ash are submerged in groundwater.