INTRODUCTION:
In 2011, discharges into the Ogeechee River from the King America Finishing Company textile plant (now Milliken) in Screven County led to one of the largest known fish kills in Georgia history. More than 38,000 fish perished along more than 80 river miles downstream of the textile manufacturer’s discharge pipes, and anglers, boaters and swimmers were warned to stay out of the water. While public outcry was immediate, the reaction of state regulators was something less than urgent. Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) was slow in response and weak in its punishment for the company’s blatant violations of clean water laws. It took a federal lawsuit brought by Ogeechee Riverkeeper to force King America to agree to take steps that would ensure the protection of the Ogeechee. Now, almost a decade later the facility’s current owners have failed to comply with the original permit that resulted from Ogeechee Riverkeeper’s settlement with the facility and State of Georgia. Today, the company routinely violates pollution control standards. What’s more, Milliken misled state regulators and the public about its release of toxic pollutants to the river. Inexplicably, EPD this year is poised to weaken the permit that regulates how much pollution the company can discharge to the Ogeechee River.

THE WATER BODY:
The 245-mile long Ogeechee River is one of Georgia’s last remaining free-flowing rivers. A blackwater beauty, it flows through Eastern Georgia, draining a 5,540 square-mile basin that encompasses wetlands, forests, farms, and scores of towns and cities. Within that basin, thousands of Georgians rely on the river and its tributaries for fish to feed their families, and the underlying aquifer for their drinking water. The Ogeechee also supports a diversity of wildlife, offers countless recreational opportunities, supplies water for agricultural and industrial uses, and carries off wastewater. Notably, it is home to several protected species, including the endangered Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons which spawn in its tea-colored water during the winter and early spring.
THE DIRT:

In 2014, when Ogeechee Riverkeeper reached a settlement with King America, the organization hoped that agreement would ultimately protect the river and the numerous riverfront communities located downstream from the facility.

The settlement forced King America to spend more than $2 million to upgrade its wastewater treatment system, strengthened the state permit regulating how much pollutants the company could discharge to the Ogeechee and even required the company to conduct a study to determine if fish were being contaminated with toxins discharged from the plant.

Unfortunately, despite completing the mandated upgrades at the facility, Milliken’s Longleaf Plant continues to pollute the Ogeechee. In the past six years, the company has been cited by Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) for discharging excessive pollutants to the river at least 25 times and has racked up more than $350,000 in fines for these violations.

Furthermore, the company misled state regulators and circumvented a requirement to study toxins in the river’s fish by submitting data to EPD that showed it was not discharging polyfluoralkyl substances (PFAS) to the river. Testing by Ogeechee Riverkeeper showed that, in fact, the company was releasing significant amounts of PFAS, a manmade chemical that the company uses in producing flame retardant fabrics.

Studies have linked PFAS to numerous health problems, including cancer and impacts to immune and hormone systems. Humans can be exposed to the chemicals by eating contaminated fish.

Despite Milliken’s six-year history of failure, EPD is now poised to issue a new pollution control permit for the Longleaf plant that weakens rather than strengthens pollution controls.

EPD is not requiring the company to conduct a fish study as mandated in the 2014 legal settlement, is eliminating limits on some pollutants and is reducing the number of times Milliken is required to test for other pollutants.

Experts who have reviewed the permit say it is less protective than permits issued for similar facilities in other states.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

EPD should reevaluate its draft permit and strengthen, not weaken, pollution controls. Furthermore, given the existence of PFAS in Milliken’s wastewater discharge, EPD should require that the company conduct a study of the river’s fish to ensure that local residents are not being exposed to toxic chemicals by eating fish contaminated with PFAS.

For More Information Contact:
Damon Mullis, Ogeechee Riverkeeper, 866-942-6222, damon@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org