Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA’S WATER

GEORGIA WATER COALITION’S DIRTY DOZEN
A Call to Action

The Georgia Water Coalition’s Dirty Dozen report highlights the politics, policies and issues that threaten the health of Georgia’s water and the well-being of 10 million Georgians.

The Dirty Dozen is not a list of the state’s “most polluted places.” Instead the report is a call to action for Georgia’s leaders and its citizens to solve ongoing pollution problems, eliminate potential threats to Georgia’s water and correct state and federal policies and actions that lead to polluted water.

The problems highlighted in this tenth edition of the report span the length and breadth of the state from Columbus in the west to St. Simons on the coast and from the Etowah River in the north to the Satilla River in the south.

But, the 2020 report is perhaps most notable for what’s NOT included.

Earlier this month, Georgia voters approved a constitutional amendment that is the first step in restoring funding for Georgia’s environmental trust funds that pay for cleanups of hazardous waste and illegal tire dumps as well as other clean community programs.

The unethical diversion of funds from these programs by legislators has been included in the last four Dirty Dozen reports and multiple reports prior to that. After working on this issue for more than ten years, Georgia Water Coalition members are hopeful that the passage of this amendment will mean that funding for these important programs will never be inked in this report again.

Unfortunately, the report includes seven issues that are making return visits to the inauspicious list—pollution problems and threats to Georgia’s water that we can’t seem to correct.

Topping the returners is the effluent from the Rayonier pulp mill in Jesup. Rayonier is making a record eighth appearance on the Dirty Dozen list for its fouling of the Altamaha River. The company’s effluent discolors the river and creates a stench for miles downstream. Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division (EPD) is set to issue a new pollution control permit for the facility this year.

The Ogeechee River and Milliken’s Longleaf textile plant in Screven County also returns to the list. In 2011, the facility, then operated...
by another company, was responsible for one of the largest fish kills in Georgia history. A lawsuit brought by Ogeechee Riverkeeper and subsequent settlement forced the operators to spend millions upgrading the plant’s wastewater treatment system. But, problems persist and the plant’s new owners misled EPD about toxic pollutants they discharge to the river.

In Monroe County along the Ocmulgee River, the saga of Georgia’s coal ash ponds continued to play out this year with dozens of property owners near Georgia Power Company’s Plant Scherer discovering toxins in their drinking water wells. Still, the power company refuses to remove its toxic coal ash at Plant Scherer to appropriate disposal areas that would limit the risk of groundwater contamination.

New, old threats also make return visits to the list: the ongoing salvage of the Golden Ray cargo ship in St. Simons Sound, a proposed titanium mine next to the Okefenokee Swamp, a proposed rocket launching facility near Cumberland Island and legislation that would invite industrial agriculture waste operations into rural Georgia.

In St. Simons Sound, the public/private command overseeing the salvage of the cargo ship carrying thousands of vehicles has chosen a salvage method that almost assures the release of oil and other pollutants into the sound. Federal and state authorities need to take actions that will ensure St. Simons Sound and the Georgia coast will be fully restored.

At the Okefenokee Swamp, the Trump Administration’s changes to the federal Clean Water Act have allowed the operators of a proposed titanium mine to avoid any federal oversight of their project. Now, only state leaders can stop this dangerous mine located next to one of Georgia’s seven natural wonders.

At Cumberland Island, Camden County residents have started a local referendum effort to stop their county commission’s ill-conceived plan to develop Spaceport Camden, a rocket launching facility that risks local homes and the Cumberland Island National Seashore.

And, at the state capital, rural property owners and long-time farmers are bracing for another legislative run at changing Georgia’s “right to farm” law in a way that would make it easier for industrial-scale agricultural operations (think thousands of hogs) to locate in Georgia and foul rural communities.
The remaining five issues are making their Dirty Dozen debuts.

In Columbus, the city's combined stormwater and sanitary sewer lines are sending untreated sewage to the Chattahoochee River during every large rain event. Some of the effluent is released to the river within the city's wildly popular 2.5-mile whitewater run that attracts some 30,000 paddlers each year.

In Brantley County, locals are fighting to prevent a landfill from opening in their community. In a county dominated by the Satilla River and wild wetlands, the proposal is, as one local advocate put it, like putting a trash can in the middle of your living room.

In Statesboro, a $20 million plan to develop properties within the floodplain of Little Lotts Creek near the downtown area has many local advocates wondering if there’s a better way to revitalize that section of town while restoring the health of the creek rather than further diminishing it.

In North Georgia, recent serious failures at landfills in Forsyth and Cherokee counties near the Etowah River have highlighted the risks of dumping too much municipal sewer sludge alongside household garbage. The failures have prompted EPD to propose new landfill regulations that should be adopted post haste.

And, finally, the handling and disposal of landfill leachate is addressed. The polluted water collected below landfills is commonly hauled to municipal sewage treatment plants for processing and treatment, but questions about emerging pollutants of concern have some wondering if landfill leachate should be given more regulatory attention.

Addressing the issues highlighted in this report through stronger enforcement of clean water laws, legislative action and sound permitting and policy decisions by state and federal agencies will ultimately lead to cleaner, healthier streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries. These actions must take place so that there will be enough clean water for current Georgians and future generations.

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 260 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia’s water since 2002.