

2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

CONASAUGA & OOSTANAULA RIVERS

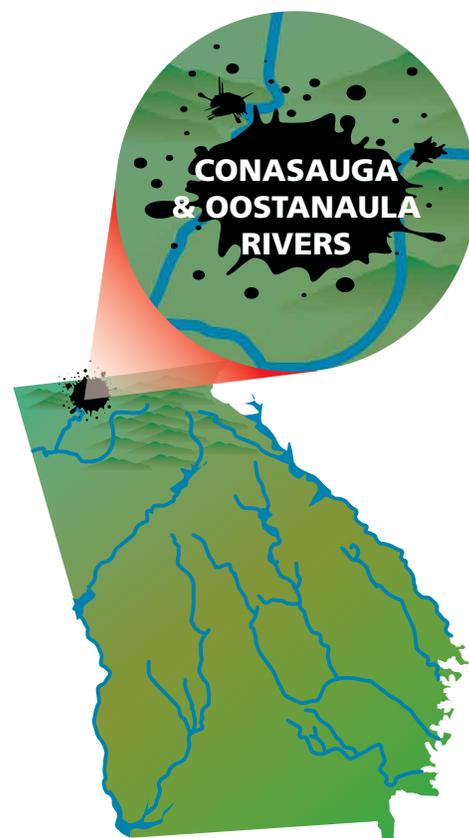
Manmade "Forever Chemicals" Taint Rivers, Water Supplies in Northwest Georgia

INTRODUCTION:

During the later half of the 20th century, Northwest Georgia—and in particular, the City of Dalton, evolved into the "Carpet Capital of the World" once boasting that the area produced 90 percent of the world's carpet. While business boomed, local rivers suffered. Pollution from the bustling, and unregulated, mills fouled the Conasauga and Oostanaula rivers. The pollution was so bad that in 1980, the City of Calhoun downstream from Dalton abandoned its drinking water intake on the Oostanaula and spent millions developing a new supply on a less polluted waterway. Sadly, thanks to manmade forever chemicals known as perfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), history is repeating itself. Linked to numerous adverse health impacts, PFAS are used to make carpets stain resistant, and for years have been discharged to local waterways. Now downstream communities are again wrestling with upstream pollution. The City of Rome ceased withdrawing raw water from the Oostanaula because of high levels of PFAS and is in the midst of litigation against its upstream neighbors. Last month the city took the extraordinary measure of approving a \$99.4 million upgrade to the city's drinking water treatment facility to eliminate the harmful contaminants. Meanwhile, the offending chemicals remain unregulated and continue to flow into our public water supplies.

THE WATER BODY:

The Conasauga and Oostanaula are known for their rich aquatic biodiversity. Part of the larger Upper Coosa River basin, no other river system in North America has a higher percentage of endemic species than does the Upper Coosa. Thirty species of mussel, snails, crayfishes and fishes can be found in the waters of the Coosa and no where else on Earth. Federally protected snails and mussels including the interrupted rocksnail, Coosa moccasinshell and Georgia pigtoe and fishes like the Conasauga logperch, trispot darter and amber darter all find homes there. In a recent study of some 300 river systems in 11 Southern states, the Conasauga ranked as the seventh most imperiled watershed because of its rich biodiversity. Northwest Georgia's and





Northeast Alabama's human population is also dependent upon clean water flowing in these rivers. Rome, Georgia, along with Centre and Gadsden, Alabama all secure their drinking water from streams originating in Northwest Georgia.

THE DIRT:

If lawsuits are any indication of the levels of pollution in the Coosa River system (including the Conasauga, Oostanaula and Chattooga rivers), then Northwest Georgia has a major problem.

Shortly after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced health advisories for PFAS in 2016, the Northeast Alabama cities of Centre and Gadsden on the Coosa River filed suit against carpet manufacturers for fouling their drinking water source and forcing them to upgrade their treatment plants. The City of Rome, after all but abandoning its water intake on the Oostanaula River and switching to the nearby Etowah River, soon followed. Two class action lawsuits have also been filed by water customers in Rome and Summerville.

In the meantime, PFAS continue to pollute the Conasauga and every connected river downstream. While manufacturers voluntarily phased out use of some PFAS chemicals, there are still 5,000 proprietary variants still in use and growing research suggests that these PFAS can bring about similarly negative health outcomes for people and impacts to freshwater aquatic wildlife.

Earlier this year, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) implemented a PFAS monitoring project to assess contamination levels in drinking water sources across the state. Yet despite being a hotbed of PFAS usage due to the state's high concentration of textile mills, Georgia is not among the 14 states that have enacted PFAS regulations.

EPD does not require that manufacturing facilities disclose if they are using PFAS except in cases where a downstream pollution problem has already been identified, and only when it involves public drinking water. Furthermore, EPD has not set limits on how much PFAS these facilities can discharge to the state's waterways.

And, the problem is not limited to the Conasauga-Oostanaula river system. PFAS contaminated the City of Summerville's drinking water source on Raccoon Creek in the Chattooga River basin of Northwest Georgia and forced the city to upgrade its drinking water treatment facility. For a time, the city provided a tanker truck so residents could fill containers of safe water to take back to their homes.

In October, the EPA announced that it planned to begin restricting PFAS discharges to waterways in 2022, an action that would lead to Georgia enforcing such regulations.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

While federal action may be pending, EPD should act now to set limits on PFAS discharges to the state's rivers and require industrial users of PFAS to publicly disclose the use of these chemicals.

Top: In the later half of the 1900s as carpet manufacturing exploded in Northwest Georgia, the Conasauga and Oostanaula rivers were routinely discolored by wastewater discharges. While those problems have been corrected and more people than ever are recreating on the rivers, PFAS, invisible pollutants, still lurk. Used to make carpets stain resistant, PFAS are linked to numerous adverse health impacts and continue to be discharged to waterways causing problems for communities like Rome that depend upon the rivers for drinking water.



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