



2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

COOSAWATTEE RIVER

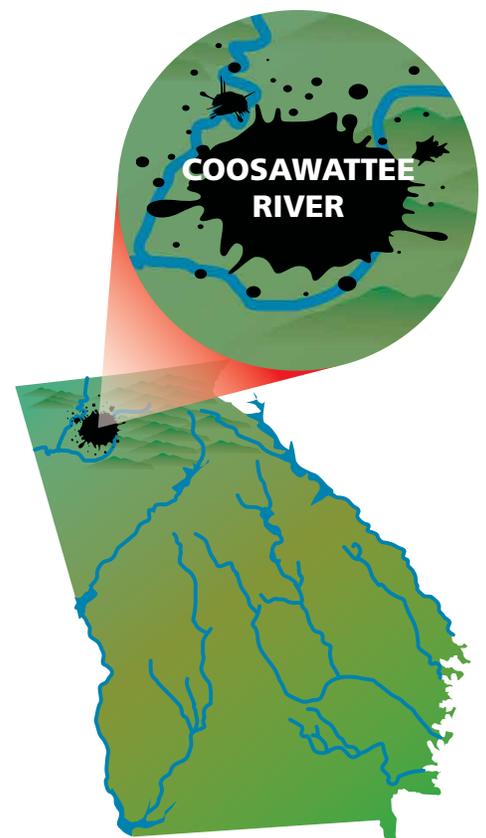
Gordon County Residents Clash with Mega Chicken Farms

INTRODUCTION:

Over the last 70 years, Georgia has established itself as the nation's leading producer of chickens. In recent years the state's chicken farmers have produced an astonishing 1.3 billion broilers annually. If there were ever a chicken uprising, the state's 10.7 million human residents would be outnumbered 140 to one. The rise of Georgia's chicken population has led to inevitable clashes with the state's growing human population as property owners seek to protect their homes and lifestyles from nuisances associated with large confined animal feeding operations. This year in North Georgia's Gordon County, which ranks second among Georgia counties in broiler production, the clash reached a boiling point when local residents objected to a proposed 24-unit chicken-house development near the Coosawattee River. Prompted by concerned voters, in August the county commission implemented a moratorium on permits for new chicken houses. Since then chicken producers have argued that mega-farms are the most efficient way to meet the world's demand for poultry, while local residents pleaded with the commission to protect their property values and not put at risk their well water and further endanger waterways already suffering from excessive nutrients—linked, in part, to litter from chicken houses in the region.

THE WATER BODY:

With its headwater streams of the Cartecay and Ellijay rivers forming on the flanks of the Blue Ridge, the nearly-50-mile-long Coosawattee River begins its route through North Georgia in the City of Ellijay. From there it winds to Carters Lake, formed by Carters Dam, and then out of the Blue Ridge and into Northwest Georgia's Ridge and Valley region to its confluence with the Conasauga River to form the Oostanaula River. It is part of the Upper Coosa River basin, which is famous for its aquatic biodiversity. No other river basin in North America has a higher percentage of endemic aquatic species; 30 crayfishes, fishes, snails and mussels live in the river system and no where else on Earth. The Coosawattee is home to rare and protected fish species like the goldline, trispot and amber darters as well protected mussels like the finelined pocketbook and Alabama creekmussel. The river and its tributaries provide drinking water for the communities surrounding Ellijay, Chatsworth and Calhoun.





THE DIRT:

The clash between property owners and big chicken in North Georgia has been 70 years in the making and all but inevitable. In 1950s, the chickens Americans put on their tables were raised mostly on traditional small farms. At that time, 1.6 million farms raised chickens and the birds' manure was mostly well distributed. But, by the dawn of the 21st century, the number of farms raising chickens had dwindled to 27,000 while the number of birds produced had increased 1,400 percent. The birds' manure—and the smell that comes with it—is now concentrated at industrialized farming operations.

During the past three decades, the size of Georgia's average poultry operation has only continued to grow. In 1987, less than 10 percent of broiler operations housed more than 500,000 birds. Today, in response to growing demand and the desire for more efficient production, some 80 percent of the state's chicken farms hold 500,000 or more birds.

So, when residents in an area of rural Gordon County where already 16 chicken houses operate got wind of a proposal to build 24 more houses in their community, they petitioned the county commission for relief. In August, the commission responded by enacting a moratorium on construction permits for new chicken houses. In November, they extended the moratorium another month.

Dust ups over chicken farms and the nuisance odors they create is nothing new for Gordon County that ranks second in broiler production among the state's 159 counties. In 2017, in response to a growing number of applications for "mega chicken houses" capable of raising around 300,000 birds annually, the commission updated its ordinances to strike a balance between protecting the county's poultry farmers and homeowners.

But the problems of the industrial farms go beyond the smells and impacts to nearby property values. If chicken litter is not managed properly it can foul both private groundwater wells near the operation and nearby streams and rivers.

Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has long-identified the Coosa system as suffering from an over-abundance of phosphorus, a nutrient associated with chicken litter, that has caused algal blooms and fish kills in Weiss Lake, a reservoir located on the Coosa River in Alabama. EPD, in conjunction with Alabama and federal authorities as well as local water planners, has worked for years to achieve a 30 percent reduction in phosphorus flowing into Weiss Lake. Managing litter and manure from the region's chicken houses has been identified as one of the keys to meeting that goal.

The proposed, 24-house operation that brought about the county-wide moratorium could create around 6.7 million pounds of phosphorus-rich chicken litter annually. Developers of the project have not indicated how and where the litter would be disposed of, only that it would be put to "beneficial use...offsite as a soil amendment/fertilizer."

If the broiler business continues its trend toward larger, more concentrated production models, the question of how to manage chicken waste and just how many chickens is too many for a given community will continue to frustrate residents and local governments.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

As industrial chicken farms grow larger, local governing bodies must enact stronger ordinances to limit the impacts of these operations on other property owners and to protect private wells and surface water resources. State authorities should investigate ways to better manage the disposal of chicken litter to ensure that high nutrient levels do not harm the state's rivers, streams and lakes.

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For More Information Contact:

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