

2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

FLINT RIVER

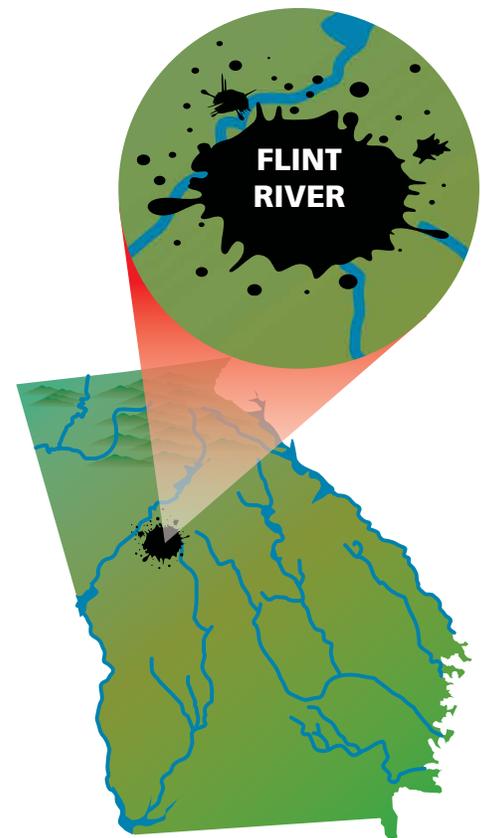
Chronic Spills at Nation's Busiest Airport Foul Drinking Water Supplies

INTRODUCTION:

What started as a race car track more than 100 years ago is now the source of chronic pollution to communities in Fayette, Clayton and Spalding counties. In 1909, Asa Candler, the founder of Coca-Cola, built an Indianapolis-style race track along the Flint River in hopes of attracting auto racing events. This venture was less successful than his foray into the soft drink business, and the track was shuttered after just a year, but it found second life hosting air shows and barnstorming events. Turns out, it was a great place to land planes. It was ultimately purchased by the city of Atlanta in 1929 and has since grown into the nation's busiest airport. Today, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport sprawls over 4,700 acres and sits, literally, on top of the Flint River. The river courses for nearly two miles in pipes and culverts beneath the 6.8 million square-foot terminal and five, two-mile runways. As such the Flint and other small streams that course around and beneath the facility are susceptible to spills—jet fuel, de-icing chemicals and sewage. Unfortunately, the airport has a dismal track record of preventing these spills. The Flint and downstream communities that draw their drinking water from the river have suffered.

THE WATER BODY:

Despite its inauspicious beginnings covered by the airport, the 346-mile Flint is a remarkably beautiful and resilient river. Leaving behind its urban beginnings, it spills across the Piedmont in shoals and rapids and through some of the most spectacular river scenery in the state at Pine Mountain and Spirewell Bluff. There, it harbors rare fish like the Halloween darter and highly sought-after sport fish like the world-famous shoal bass. Undammed for most of its length, it is one of only 42 rivers in the 48 contiguous states that flows for more than 125 miles without being confined behind a dam. Each day in metro Atlanta, the Flint and its tributaries provide about 30 million gallons of drinking water to residents in Clayton, Fayette, Spalding, Pike and Coweta counties. Downstream, in Southwest Georgia, the Flint continues to serve as a work horse. Along with the Floridan aquifer with which it is hydrologically connected, the Flint provides irrigation water to hundreds of thousands of acres of cropland.





THE DIRT:

There's no doubt Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is a major economic driver for metro Atlanta. Airport studies report that the complex employs some 63,000 people and has an annual economic impact of \$82 billion, but those studies are silent on the airport's environmental impact, particularly on the Flint River that has suffered as the airport has grown up around it.

In September, fish in the river perished when some of 700 gallons of spilled jet fuel coursed through the airport's stormwater system to the river. This was not the first incident to foul the Flint. In 2017, there was a 1,000-gallon fuel spill and a year earlier, a 4,500-gallon spill. De-icing fluid, used to take ice and snow off planes' wings, has also been released to the river in the past.

Even a month after the most recent spill, an oily sheen remained on the river and fumes were recognizable along the river's course just downstream from the airport.

Sewage spills associated with the airport have also plagued the river. During the last decade, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) documented 13 sewage spills into the Flint or its nearby tributaries, three of which caused fish kills. Earlier this year, EPD levied a fine of \$22,914 against the airport.

Within 30 miles downstream of the airport are three drinking water intakes drawing an average of 30 million gallons a day from the Flint for residents in Fayette, Clayton and Spalding counties. During the most recent spills, water authorities that manage these drinking water systems say the airport and EPD did not notify them in a timely manner.

While a state law passed in 2014 requires businesses to report spills that could endanger health or property of downstream water users to EPD, there is no requirement that those businesses notify the users directly, and EPD has wide latitude in determining if it should notify state and local emergency response officials and whether to notify anyone else, including water authorities.

The latest spill comes at a time when a consortium of businesses, local governments and non-profit organizations—including Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport—are working together to "Find the Flint" and restore the Flint's headwaters while revitalizing communities along its course.

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

The airport must make sufficient investments in sewage, fuel and de-icing containment infrastructure to ensure 100 percent elimination of spills to the Flint River. When spills occur that impact downstream water users, the airport should notify not just EPD, but appropriate water authorities in Clayton, Fayette and Spalding counties.



Top: The Flint River as it appears before coursing through pipes and culverts beneath Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. The Flint rises just a couple of miles north of the airport in East Point and courses for some two miles underneath the airport, making it susceptible to fuel and sewage spills at the sprawling facility. Photo by Joe Cook Above: At Forest Parkway, immediately downstream from the Atlanta airport, absorbent mats were used to collect jet fuel that made its way to the Flint River following a spill that occurred Sept. 28. The spill killed fish in the river and threatened public water supplies downstream. Photo by Hannah Palmer



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