



2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

OCMULGEE RIVER

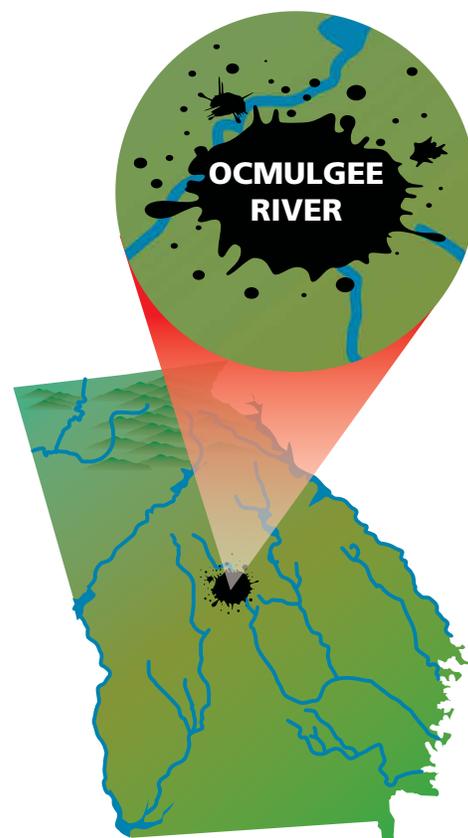
Plastics-to-Fuel Plant in Macon-Bibb is Part of the Problem, not Solution, to Plastic Pollution

INTRODUCTION:

It's undeniable the planet has a plastic pollution problem. Since the 1950s, an estimated 8.3 billion metric tons of plastics has been created. Of that, 6.3 billion has become waste, and today only nine percent of plastics are actually recycled. The rest fill up landfills or litter our land and water, threatening wildlife, spoiling the world's natural beauty, and compromising our health. What's more, because they are derived from fossil fuels, the production of plastics contributes to global climate change. In recent years, plastic makers and multinational fossil fuel corporations have touted "advanced recycling," also called "chemical recycling," as a solution to plastic pollution. These techniques use chemical treatments combined with high heat to turn plastic waste into fuel and other petrochemical products. Georgia now has a proposal from the San Francisco-based company Brightmark to build the world's largest plastic-to-fuel processing plant in Macon-Bibb County. At first blush, the facility shines like a silver bullet for reducing plastic pollution—but experts suggest that converting plastics to fuel only contributes to global climate change and local pollution and keeps our society dependent on plastics.

THE WATER BODY:

The proposed plastics-to-fuel facility would be located in Macon-Bibb County within the Ocmulgee River basin. While the large development project would stress water and air quality in the basin, its impacts would reach even beyond the boundaries of the Ocmulgee River watershed. The Ocmulgee River, flowing through the heart of Macon, actually begins in the heart of Atlanta as the South River and in the capital city's eastern suburbs as the Yellow and Alcovy rivers. Those rivers mingle together at Jackson Lake formed by Lloyd Shoals Dam near Jackson. From the dam, the Ocmulgee flows some 250 miles to its confluence with the Oconee River to form the Altamaha, Georgia's largest river. On its journey through middle Georgia, it supplies drinking water for hundreds of thousands of Georgians, including the people of Macon.





THE DIRT:

At a time when fossil fuels are falling out of favor and being replaced by greener energy sources like wind and solar and when electric cars are fast replacing our gas guzzlers, the companies that produce fossil fuels are scrambling to secure their future. Plastics—made from fossil fuels—are seen as their savior. In the next 30 years, plastic production is expected to grow to 25 million metric tons annually, more than double current production levels. By 2030, according to one report, the greenhouse gases generated from plastic production will exceed those generated from the nation's coal-fired power plants.

Not surprisingly, plastics manufacturers and fossil fuel companies are fighting back against plastics bans and other regulations while simultaneously lobbying lawmakers to provide public funds for “advanced recycling” technologies that use heat or chemicals to break down plastics into fuels and other products.

A 2020 Greenpeace report identified \$506 million in taxpayer funds that have been used to support “advanced recycling” since 2017, including \$187.5 million for a plastics-to-fuel facility in Indiana developed by Brightmark, the company that wants to build in Macon-Bibb County. Brightmark is seeking \$500 million in tax exempt bonds from the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Development Authority to help fund its project.

Brightmark's plans call for a \$680 million, 5.3-million square-foot facility that would divert 400,000 tons of plastic waste annually and turn it into 64 million gallons of ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel, naphtha blend stocks (used to produce gas, kerosene and lighter fluid among other things) and 20 million gallons of wax. British Petroleum is lined up to be Brightmark's biggest customer for its diesel fuel.

While some plastic-to-fuel technologies have shown promise in the laboratory, when scaled up to industrial levels, many have failed.

Observers warn that the “chemical recycling” facility in Macon would result in the release of greenhouse gases and highly toxic dioxins locally while producing fuels that, when burned, will release still more greenhouse gases. The process would also perpetuate our dependence on plastics and fossil fuels by creating new pipelines for unrecyclable plastic waste.

In the midst of an ongoing climate crisis, plastic-to-fuel facilities should not be considered, according to Jessica Wahl, Clean Energy Associate with Environment Georgia. “We need to transition away from single-use plastics and embrace clean energy sources like solar rather than investing in projects that lock in our reliance on fossil fuels,” she said. “Plastic-to-fuel technologies pollute our air and water and they have no place in a circular economy.”

WHAT MUST BE DONE:

Macon-Bibb leaders should consider the negative local and global impacts of the proposed Brightmark facility before issuing bonds to fund this project. No public funds should be used to support a project that contributes to the growing climate crisis. Furthermore, local governments and state leaders should enact measures aimed at reducing our dependence on single-use plastics; the real solution to our plastic waste problem is to reduce our consumption and production of these materials.

Top: Plastics pile up on the South River in Atlanta. Since the 1950s, an estimated 8.3 billion metric tons of plastics has been created. Of that, 6.3 billion has become waste, and today only nine percent of plastics are actually recycled. The rest fill up landfills or litter our land and water.



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