



# 2021's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER

## OGEECHEE RIVER

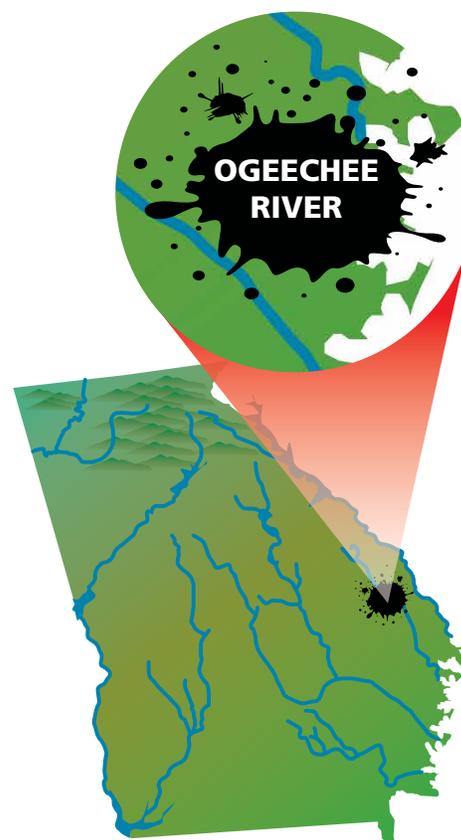
Delays in Setting Pollution Limits at Textile Plant Risks River, Public Health

### INTRODUCTION:

Sometimes pollution problems make appearances on the Georgia Water Coalition's Dirty Dozen report because they are emerging threats; others appear in the report year after year because of inaction. Such is the case with the ongoing pollution of the Ogeechee River by the Milliken textile facility in Screven County—the very same facility that in 2011 caused the death of some 38,000 fish. At issue is the failure of state environmental regulators to definitively tell the company what pollutants—and in what amounts—it can safely discharge to the Ogeechee River. Since 2018, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has delayed setting new pollution limits for the facility. Last year, it finally released a draft pollution control permit for the textile plant, but a year later, that draft permit has still not been finalized. Meanwhile, the company continues to discharge chemicals into the river known to cause health problems in humans, and it appears EPD will allow the company to continue this practice without setting limits on how much of these dangerous chemicals can be put in the river.

### THE WATER BODY:

The 245-mile long Ogeechee River is one of Georgia's last remaining free-flowing rivers. A blackwater beauty, it flows through Eastern Georgia, draining a 5,540 square-mile basin that encompasses wetlands, forests, farms, and scores of towns and cities. Within that basin, thousands of Georgians rely on the river and its tributaries for fish to feed their families, and the underlying aquifer for their drinking water. The Ogeechee also supports a diversity of wildlife, offers countless recreational opportunities, supplies water for agricultural and industrial uses, and carries off wastewater. Notably, it is home to several protected species, including the endangered Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons which spawn in its tea-colored water during the winter and early spring.





## THE DIRT:



Delays—especially in the midst of an international healthcare crisis—are understandable, but for the Ogeechee River, its wildlife, and the people that live and recreate on it, the time of waiting has been particularly frustrating. The delay in cleaning up the discharge from Milliken's Screven County textile mill predates the pandemic by two years.

In 2018, when it was time to reevaluate the company's pollution control permit to determine if changes needed to be made, EPD punted, allowing the company to continue operating under the 2014 permit under an administrative extension. Finally, in September of 2020, EPD released a new draft permit for the facility which was met with alarm and outrage by Ogeechee River advocates.

Notably, the draft permit failed to require the company to conduct a study to determine if fish were being contaminated with toxins discharged from the plant. In fact, under the 2014 permit, Milliken was required to perform a fish tissue study, but the study was never completed.

Tests conducted by Ogeechee Riverkeeper showed that, in fact, the company was releasing significant amounts of PFAS, a man made chemical the company uses to make flame retardant fabrics and that have been linked to numerous human health problems.

The draft permit, now more than a year old, does not place limits on how much PFAS can be discharged to the river, only that the company disclose what PFAS chemicals they are using. In the past seven years, the facility has violated its existing pollution control permit at least 35 times and been fined more than \$350,000. The facility has been in violation of its existing permit on multiple occasions since the draft permit was issued in September of 2020.

Rather than getting tough on a habitual polluter with a track record of multiple permit violations, EPD is instead giving the company a pass, proposing to eliminate limits on some pollutants and reducing the number of times Milliken is required to test for other pollutants.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE:

EPD should reevaluate its draft permit and strengthen, not weaken, pollution controls. Furthermore, given the existence of PFAS in Milliken's wastewater discharge, EPD should require that the company conduct a study of the river's fish to ensure that local residents are not being exposed to toxic chemicals by eating fish contaminated with PFAS.

*Top: The Milliken textile plant in Screven County uses PFAS to make flame-retardant fabric and then releases the harmful chemicals into the Ogeechee. Above: As part of a previous pollution control permit, Milliken was to have conducted a study of fish tissue to determine if the river's fish were accumulating pollutants discharged from the plant. The study would help determine if local anglers were in danger of ingesting harmful pollutants when they eat fish caught from the river. The company never performed that study.*



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