



2021 DIRTY DOZEN REPORT

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For more information about specific Dirty Dozen sites view the report at:

<https://www.gawater.org/resources/dirty-dozen>

For Immediate Release Dec. 14, 2021: Today, Georgia’s leading water advocacy organizations released their “Dirty Dozen” for 2021 in a 28-page report highlighting 12 of the worst offenses to Georgia’s waters (<https://www.gawater.org/resources/dirty-dozen>).

Rather than identifying the “most polluted places” in Georgia, the Georgia Water Coalition’s (GWC) Dirty Dozen report instead highlights the politics, policies and issues that threaten the health of Georgia’s water and the well being of more than 10 million Georgians.

The problems highlighted in this eleventh edition of the report span the length and breadth of the state from Lake Harding in the west to St. Simons Sound on the coast and from the Conasauga River in the north to the Okefenokee Swamp in the south.

Of the 12 issues highlighted, five make return appearances on the inauspicious list, including the problem of coal ash disposal which makes a six consecutive appearance.

The list includes the following:

- **Chattahoochee & Ocmulgee Rivers:** Coal ash at multiple Georgia Power Company fossil fuel plants pollutes groundwater in Cobb, Coweta, Carroll and Monroe counties.
- **Ogeechee River:** A three-year delay in updating pollution control permit allows the continued discharge of dangerous chemicals in Screven County.
- **Okefenokee Swamp:** Proposed heavy mineral sands mine in Charlton County threatens one of Georgia’s natural wonders.
- **St. Simons Sound:** The Golden Ray shipwreck is gone, but the extent of damage to Georgia’s coast still must be evaluated.
- **Groundwater:** A 30-year-old Superfund site in Brunswick still leaches toxins into groundwater and monitoring data suggests those toxins are migrating to neighboring properties.

- **Georgia's Coast:** Georgia is one of the most vulnerable and least prepared states when it comes to dealing with effects of climate change, but Georgia's elected officials have largely failed to address the issue.
- **Ocmulgee River:** A proposed plastics rendering plant near Macon touted as a solution to plastics pollution is really part of the problem.
- **Chattahoochee River:** Since a family pet died from coming in contact with cyanobacteria while swimming in Bull Sluice Lake in Roswell, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper has identified spots on West Point Lake and Lake Harding with the same harmful algal blooms caused by excessive nutrients
- **Whitewater Creek:** Dirty stormwater runoff from a large mixed-use development is muddying a historic Fayette County creek and lake, forcing homeowners and Flint Riverkeeper to file a lawsuit to stop the pollution.
- **Flint River:** Jet fuel and sewage spills repeatedly foul the Flint that flows *beneath* Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. Advocates say it's high time these needless spills stopped.
- **Coosawattee River:** In Gordon County a proposal to build a 24-house mega chicken farm has prompted homeowners to plead with their county commission to protect their property values, well water and their river.
- **Conasauga-Oostanaula:** Polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) from carpet mills are haunting Northwest Georgians forcing downstream water providers like the City of Rome to spend millions to remove the harmful chemicals from drinking water. To date, the state has failed to regulate these chemicals.

Underlying each issue is an intersection between quality of life and quest for profit. Whether its an upstream development filling a neighborhood amenity lake with muddy sediment or a mining company threatening one of Georgia's natural wonders, in each is the struggle to find a balance between protecting our natural resources and accommodating the demands of a growing population and sustainable economy.

Topping the issues making return appearances in the report is Georgia Power Company's coal ash. While other states have forced power utilities to remove toxic coal ash from unlined pits at coal-burning power plants, Georgia's leaders through the state's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) are poised to allow the company to keep its ash in unlined pits where it is making groundwater unfit for human consumption.

Milliken's textile plant in Screven County also returns to the list, largely because of another year of failure by EPD to force the company to take responsibility for its dangerous discharges into the Ogeechee River. Since 2018, EPD has failed to finalize a new pollution control permit for the facility while the company continues to discharge harmful polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) into the river. Meanwhile, a study of fish tissue that the plant was supposed to conduct remains uncompleted. The study would help determine the potential health impacts to those who eat fish caught from the river.

In Charlton County, the ongoing fight over a proposed heavy mineral sands mine near the Okefenokee Swamp also returns to the list. This year, more than 40,000 e-mails have been sent to EPD and more than 10,000 e-mails and phone calls have been received by Gov. Brian Kemp's office urging the state to stop this mine. Its future rests with EPD which will soon decide whether to issue permits for this controversial proposal that has drawn international attention.

In St. Simons Sound, while the wreck of the Golden Ray cargo ship has finally been removed, the long-term impacts of the maritime disaster remain unclear. Coastal advocates are calling on Georgia officials to request a Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The process would involve a thorough evaluation of the damage done to the Sound and surrounding areas and hold responsible parties accountable.

Also on the coast, a legacy pollution problem returns to the list in the form of the Hercules 009 Landfill Superfund site in Brunswick. Since the 1990s, a landfill operated by Hercules adjacent to the Golden Isles Parkway has leached benzene and other toxic chemicals into groundwater. Now, recent testing suggests that the contaminants are migrating in groundwater to adjacent properties.

Notably new to the report this year is the issue of climate change and how Georgia's elected officials have been mostly silent and inactive on this problem. Two additional issues highlighted in the report are directly related to climate change or are exacerbated by our changing climate.

While Georgia is considered one of the state's most vulnerable to climate change, it is also one of the least prepared states to deal with the public health impacts of climate change, according to a recent study by the Trust of America's Public Health. In particular, Georgia's elected officials have been slow to embrace policies that transition the state toward cleaner energy sources.

Yet, at the same time state leaders seem to have embraced a proposed plastics rendering plant in Macon. Said to be the largest plastics "recycling" facility in the nation, the proposed plant would take plastics and break them down to diesel and other fuels. What seems like a "silver bullet" for the plastics pollution problem is, in fact, part of the problem, generating more greenhouse gases through the production, transformation and ultimate burning of fossil-fuel-based plastics, while perpetuating our dependence on plastics.

And, finally, there's one pollution problem that is likely to get worse with climate change: harmful algal blooms that thrive in nutrient-rich water and warm temperatures. Earlier this year, a family pet died after coming in contact with cyanobacteria at Bull Sluice Lake on the Chattahoochee River in Roswell. Since then, Chattahoochee

Riverkeeper has identified two more locations on West Point Lake and Lake Harding with harmful algal blooms. Nutrients washing off the land from thousands of sources make this a particularly difficult problem to fix; it will take the efforts of literally millions of individuals.

The final four items in the report are old pollutants we're all too familiar with in Georgia—dirt, industrial spills, chicken manure and textile plant waste.

In Fayetteville, local residents and Flint Riverkeeper have filed a lawsuit against Trilith, the operators of a mixed-used development associated with one of the largest film production studios in the nation. Dirt from the development is regularly washing into Whitewater Creek and Bennett Lake, destroying the lake and residents' use and enjoyment of it. Homeowners that bought into the Crystal Lake subdivision on Bennett Lake are now dealing with a muddy mess that continues to get worse.

At Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, a series of jet fuel, de-icing fluid and sewage spills have caused fish kills in the Flint River, which to the surprise of many, courses through pipes and culverts for about two miles *underneath* the airport and its five runways. River advocates are calling for the airport to eliminate these needless insults to a river that has already suffered the expense of Atlanta building the world's busiest airport.

In North Georgia's Gordon County, residents and chicken producers are squaring off over mega chicken houses. As the demand for poultry has grown so has the demand for efficient production methods. As a result, Georgia's chicken farms have gotten larger, as has the concentration of chicken manure and the odors it brings. But, more is at stake than just nuisance odors. The manure is contributing to algal blooms in downstream reservoirs in the Coosa River system and has the potential to foul private drinking water supplies.

Finally, along Georgia's Conasauga and Oostanaula rivers history is repeating itself. When carpet manufacturers polluted those streams with dyes in the 1960s and 70s, the City of Calhoun abandoned its drinking water intake on the Oostanaula and spent millions developing a new supply on a less polluted waterway. Now an invisible pollutant—PFAS, used to make carpet stain resistant and known to cause human health problems—has caused the City of Rome to stop using its water intake on the Oostanaula and has prompted legal action against carpet manufacturers. Meanwhile, PFAS continue to pollute our drinking water because Georgia's environmental regulators have not placed limits on how much of these contaminants can be discharged to our rivers.

Addressing the issues highlighted in this report through stronger enforcement of clean water laws, legislative action and sound permitting and policy decisions by state and federal agencies will ultimately lead to cleaner, healthier streams, rivers, lakes and

estuaries. Of course, responsible actions by individuals, businesses, industries and local governments are also critical to solving these pollution problems.

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 285 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of Georgians.