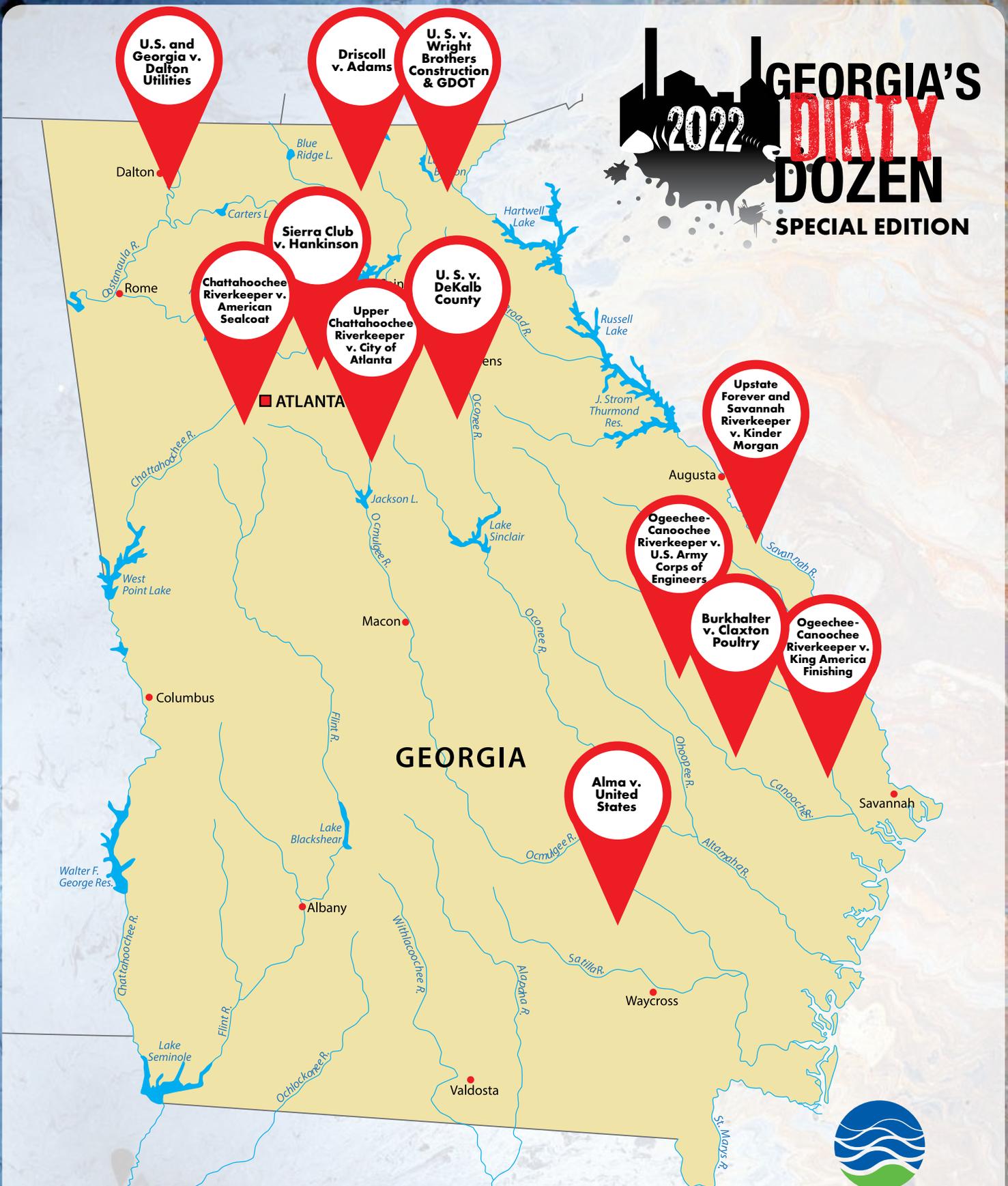
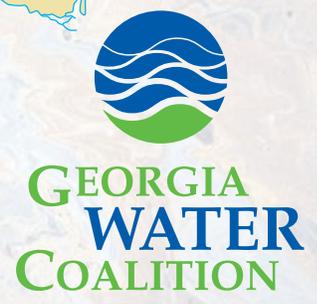


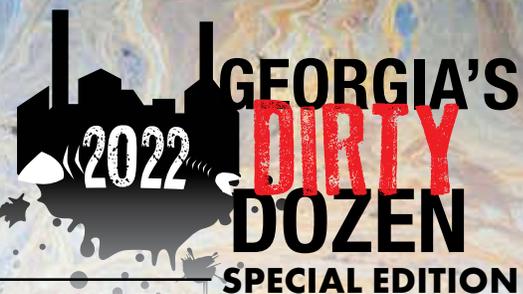
# 2022 GEORGIA'S DIRTY DOZEN SPECIAL EDITION



Celebrating the Clean Water Act's Impact on  
**GEORGIA'S WATER**



# Celebrating the Clean Water Act's Impact on **GEORGIA'S WATER**



## **GEORGIA WATER COALITION'S 2022 DIRTY DOZEN REPORT**

### Highlighting 50 Years of Progress Under the Clean Water Act

For the past 11 years, the Georgia Water Coalition's Dirty Dozen report annually has highlighted the worst offenses to the health of Georgia's water. This year will be different. On the 50th anniversary of the passage of the federal Clean Water Act, the Dirty Dozen report traces Georgia's landmark Clean Water Act legal cases that have enabled significant restoration of the state's streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries.

Ask any Georgia Water Coalition member, and they will tell you Georgia's water is cleaner today than it was in 1972; they'll also tell you there's still work to be done.

Pollution problems persist.

Despite federal actions aimed at forcing both the City of Atlanta and DeKalb County to fix aging sewage systems, raw sewage still flows into metro area streams and rivers. Likewise, rampant land development still sullies neighborhood streams—and fishing holes—with tons of sediment and mud, escalating the costs of treating drinking water drawn from our waterways. And despite education efforts by both state regulators and non-profit watershed protection groups, many industrial facilities still fail to prevent polluted stormwater from fouling local streams. Emerging pollutants are also challenging the strength of the Clean Water Act as communities across the nation—including many in Georgia—grapple with per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances—PFAS. The manmade chemical used in making stain resistant carpet and fireproof textiles (among many other uses), persists in the environment and has been linked to multiple health problems in humans.



When the Clean Water Act was passed in 1972, there were no local citizen watershed protection groups in Georgia; today, there are more than 30 local organizations focused solely on protecting a specific water body, including multiple organizations working to protect the Okefenokee Swamp from a proposed heavy mineral sands mine.



Georgia is home to more than 70,000 miles of rivers and streams, 425,000 acres of reservoirs and along the coast, five large estuaries surrounded by some 400,000 acres of marshes.

Recently, the Clean Water Act, itself, has come under attack from nationally-elected leaders influenced by industry, mining, agriculture and development interests seeking to limit which water bodies are protected under the act. Those attacks have recently greased the wheels for a controversial mining proposal in Charlton County to begin operation near the Okefenokee Swamp, threatening that globally-significant natural wonder.

Yet, the long arc of progress made under the Clean Water Act is nonetheless remarkable. Georgia headlines of the late 1960s and early 1970s attest to the struggle to stem pollution from industries and municipal sewage treatment facilities.

Three months before the Act's passage, discharges from the City of Columbus's sewage treatment facility killed



Initially, the Clean Water Act was focused on eliminating “end of the pipe” pollution at sewage treatment plants and industrial facilities, but lawsuits brought by citizens and river protection groups have clarified that the law also regulates non-point source pollution like dirt and mud that washes off construction sites during heavy rains.

In 1972, local river or watershed protection groups did not exist in Georgia. Today, there are more than 30 local organizations focused solely on protecting a specific water body. The Georgia Water Coalition represents more than 280 entities across the state working together for policies that protect Georgia’s water.

In this report, the Georgia Water Coalition recognizes 12 landmark legal decisions that have furthered the goals of the Clean Water Act in Georgia. They include cases that forced municipalities to upgrade their sewer infrastructure; demanded compliance from industries; confirmed stormwater runoff as a pollutant regulated by the Act; elevated the Act’s importance in the protection of wetlands; and even forced the federal government into compliance with its own landmark law.

The majority of these legal decisions were initiated by citizens and grassroots organizations who demanded clean water. That’s thanks to a provision in the law that allows citizens to sue polluters when state and federal regulators fail in their duties.

The Act’s “citizen suit” provision has perhaps resulted in the most significant strides toward healthy rivers in Georgia. When mud messes up their property, when sewage sullies their boating paths, when industries destroy their fisheries, Georgians have bravely faced public scrutiny—and even physical harm—to force polluters to clean up their act. This report tells those stories.

30,000 fish in the Chattahoochee River. A 1970 report of the Georgia Water Quality Control Board described the Chattahoochee downstream of Atlanta as “near septic in condition.” At the same time on the Savannah River, consumer crusader Ralph Nader’s “Raiders” were exposing pollution from the world’s largest paper mill, describing the river in downtown Savannah as boiling with “hydrogen sulfide and methane gas.” Blue crabs in the river’s estuary were deemed unfit for human consumption. In Dalton, pollution from carpet mills was so pronounced that it soon forced downstream communities to cease drawing their drinking water from the Oostanaula River. Nationally, only one third of the country’s waters were considered safe for fishing and swimming.

It was against the backdrop of these widespread water pollution problems that Georgians said enough was enough. In the gubernatorial election year of 1970, the *Columbus Ledger* editorialized: “It’s politically smart this summer to promise...a program that will rid Georgia of water, air and land pollution.” That local support for environmental legislation in Georgia and elsewhere elevated the issue to national importance—among both republican and democratic leaders.

In 1972, when President Richard Nixon vetoed the Clean Water Act over concerns about the initial \$24 billion in spending associated with the bill, the Senate and House responded to popular sentiment and voted to override his veto. In a show of bipartisanism, the Senate voted 52-12 to override while the House voted 247-23. More than 110 Republican legislators broke with the president to pass the landmark legislation.

Since the Clean Water Act’s passage, Georgians have watched their streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries—in most cases—steadily improve. What’s more, the Clean Water Act’s goal of making all the nation’s water bodies swimmable and fishable has been embraced by the populace.



Since the passage of the Clean Water Act, Georgians have watched the health of their streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries—in most cases—steadily improve. Pollution from sewage treatment plants and industrial facilities has largely been stemmed, but still not all of Georgia’s water bodies are deemed “swimmable and fishable”—the stated goal of the legislation.

