

# 2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



## ABERCORN CREEK

### Growth Spurred by Port of Savannah Threatens Region's Water Supplies

#### INTRODUCTION

When Gen. James Oglethorpe sailed up the Savannah River in 1733, the "port" at Yamacraw Bluff which would grow into modern-day Savannah had a depth of some 10 feet. Today, that same port, altered by the hand of man, boasts a depth of 47 feet. The most recent harbor deepening cost taxpayers \$973 million and enabled a new era of megaships to create the country's third busiest port. The port's success has been both blessing and curse. It generates an estimated \$5 billion for the state's economy, but it has also spawned a local warehouse building and population boom that is transforming rural landscapes and threatening local communities and the health of coastal streams, estuaries and marshes. Land surrounding Abercorn Creek which supplies drinking water for the City of Savannah and neighboring communities was not insulated from this boom. Recent warehouse construction near the creek prompted the City of Savannah to deem its water source at great risk of contamination due to commercial and industrial development. Coupled with already scarce water sources because of saltwater intrusion into the area's underground aquifer, the rampant growth has elicited a backlash from residents and local water advocates who are urging regional leaders to manage the growth, plan for future water supplies and enforce regulations aimed at protecting water sources like Abercorn Creek.

#### THE WATER BODY

Abercorn Creek in Effingham County is just one of hundreds of streams feeding the Savannah River, but since 1948 when Savannah leaders built a water intake on the creek to supplement the city's primary groundwater sources, it has played an oversized role in the growth and sustainability of the region. As demand for the region's groundwater has increased, saltwater has intruded into the pristine Floridan aquifer, making Abercorn Creek a critical surface water source for some 400,000 residents in Chatham, Effingham and Bryan counties. So important, in fact, that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has invested millions of dollars in protecting the Savannah River water supplies. In the early 2000s, the agency spent \$4.3 million to divert a portion of the Savannah's flow into the Abercorn drainage to improve the health of water pumped from the creek. Then in 2018 when the Corps



In communities surrounding the Port of Savannah, the boom in warehouse construction has galvanized local residents who have organized "Don't Box Us In" groups aimed at preserving the area's rural landscape and historic culture.

recognized that continued harbor deepening at the Port of Savannah could lead to saltwater reaching as far inland as the city's intake pipes on Abercorn, the agency built for Savannah a \$43.5 million emergency off-stream reservoir to hold freshwater from the creek as a hedge against that pending threat.

## THE DIRT

Those products coming to and from the Port of Savannah need a place to stay on their way to market. Thus, the warehouses. In 2022, Savannah ranked second in the nation among cities in terms of growth of warehouse development. In 2023, the pace did not slow. Within an 80-mile run of I-95 surrounding the port, the year saw some 100 million square feet of warehouse space constructed or planned—the equivalent of paving 2,000 acres.



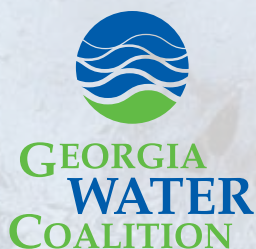
A container ship passes historic Fort Jackson on the Savannah River. Deepening of the harbor to 47 feet cost taxpayers \$973 million but ushered in a new era of megaships to create the nation's third busiest port. The success of the port has spurred a construction and population boom.

This growth comes just as Georgia's Environmental Protection Division capped water withdrawals from the Floridan Aquifer in a four county area surrounding Savannah to 2004 levels and in 2013 extended a moratorium on new withdrawals from the aquifer. To date the utilities have steadily reduced their daily withdrawals through water conservation and efficiency measures, but the recent growth spurt threatens to undo those gains.

Indeed, new home development associated with the Hyundai plant prompted recent passage of a controversial bill that allows a private water utility to supply water to Bryan County's new residences. Opponents argued the bill would undermine local government water planning and create dangerous competition for limited water resources.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Local leaders must work cooperatively across jurisdictions to implement ordinances that mitigate the impacts of rampant land development and protect the region's surface and groundwater water supplies. With an assist from the state, these same leaders must develop a realistic, long-term water supply plan for the region.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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In 2022, Effingham County approved the construction of 1.1 million square feet of warehouses near Savannah's water intake on Abercorn Creek, sparking protests from the city and clean water advocates alike. The warehouses ultimately were built, but only after Effingham County appeased the City of Savannah by requiring builders to install stormwater controls aimed at mitigating the impacts of the big-box development.

The controversy highlighted ongoing conflicts between the region's port-spawned warehouse boom and local residents who have organized "Don't Box Us In" groups aimed at preserving the area's rural landscape and historic culture.

Growth is not limited to warehouses though; people are coming too. Bryan County, immediately west of Savannah and home to the now-under-construction Hyundai electric vehicle plant, ranked as the fastest growing county in Georgia and sixth fastest in the nation, according to the 2020 census. And the growth isn't slowing; the Hyundai plant will employ some 8,000 workers.



The City of Savannah's water intake on Abercorn Creek was built in 1948. Since then it has played an oversized role in the growth and sustainability of the region. The surface water source has been especially important as limits on groundwater withdrawals have been put in place because of saltwater intrusion.