

# 2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



## ALTAMAHA RIVER

### State Allows Pulp Mill to Continue Polluting Georgia's "Little Amazon"

#### INTRODUCTION

The saga of pollution from the RYAM (formerly Rayonier or Rayonier Advanced Materials) pulp mill on the Altamaha River near Jesup is well documented. This marks its ninth appearance in Georgia Water Coalition's Dirty Dozen report since 2011. At issue is the color and odor of some 50 million gallons of effluent RYAM discharges daily to the river in the production of refined wood pulp that is ultimately used in everything from sausage casings to LCD screens. At low river levels common during the peak summer recreation season, the black discharge from the mill noticeably discolors the river and leaves it smelling of "rotten eggs." This summer, while boaters and anglers choose to—or choose not to—recreate in the river below this discharge, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) will make decisions about how much and what kinds of pollutants the facility can continue to legally discharge. If EPD's draft permit for the facility released to the public earlier this year is enacted without changes, the status quo will remain and Altamaha River users will be forced to continue navigating—or avoiding—these uninviting waters.

#### THE WATER BODY

The Altamaha is Georgia's largest river and the third largest contributor of freshwater to the Atlantic Ocean on North America's eastern shore. It drains a 14,000-square mile basin stretching from Atlanta and Athens to Darien. It is a place of unsurpassed beauty. Often called "Georgia's Little Amazon," it was named to The Nature Conservancy's list of the 75 last great places on Earth. A treasure trove of biodiversity, the Altamaha River basin is home to 120 species of rare or endangered plants and animals. The two major forks that form the Altamaha, the Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers, provide drinking water to communities from metro Atlanta to Middle Georgia. With more than 100,000 acres of conservation land along its banks, boaters, anglers and hunters can travel for about 60 miles downstream of the RYAM discharge near Jesup to the Georgia coast through a vast wilderness. Only the smell from the pulp mill and discolored water from its discharge mars the experience.



In an image shot in October 2023, the black discharge from the RYAM pulp mill in Jesup discolors the Altamaha. Altamaha Riverkeeper contends that the mill's effluent interferes with the public's use and enjoyment of the river because of the discharge's color and strong odor.

## THE DIRT

"Industry has not yet reached the millennium where there will be no odors, noises or waste disposal problems," said Rayonier president Clyde Morgan. The year was 1955; months earlier, Rayonier's pulp mill on the Altamaha River had opened and its discharge immediately killed thousands of fish prompting legal action from downstream anglers.

Seventy years later, the RYAM mill continues to pollute the river even though we have reached a day when modern treatment systems can remove the odor and color from RYAM's wastewater.

Georgia's water quality laws guarantee that "all waters shall be free from material related to municipal, industrial or other discharges which produce turbidity, color, odor or other objectionable conditions which interfere with the designated use of the water body." Altamaha Riverkeeper contends that the mill's discharge interferes with the public's use and enjoyment of the river because of the discharge's offensive smell and impact on the river's color.

In 2016, a state administrative law judge agreed with the Riverkeeper. In response to this ruling, EPD weakened the state's "narrative water quality" standard such that on appeal, state courts in 2018 ruled that the mill's discharge did not "unreasonably interfere with the designated use" of the water body...in this case fishing.



An immature little blue heron rests on a snag overlooking the Altamaha. The river is a treasure trove of biodiversity—home to 160 different species of birds as well as 120 species of rare or endangered plants and animals.



The RYAM pulp mill rises above the banks of the Altamaha. The facility discharges some 50 million gallons of treated wastewater daily to the river in the production of refined wood pulp that is ultimately used in everything from sausage casings to LCD screens.

Since then, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has weighed in telling EPD that its weakened narrative water quality standard didn't meet federal muster. Undeterred, EPD is now poised to renew RYAM's wastewater discharge permit for five more years without enacting pollution limits that will noticeably change the color of the mill's discharge.

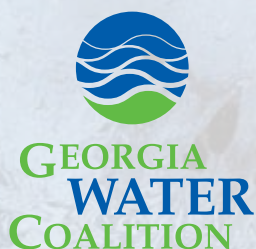
While a 2008 consent decree with EPD has led to marked improvements in RYAM's discharge over the past 15 years, the effluent released still falls well short of what is now considered the industry standard.

"Similar mills in other countries are required to discharge completely clear wastewater," said Altamaha Riverkeeper's Maggie Van Cantfort. "Even in neighboring states, pulp mill color discharge has been 66% less than RYAM's current discharge."

While the technology exists to relieve Altamaha River users of this long-standing pollution problem, EPD appears willing to let the mill continue the status quo.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

EPD should issue a wastewater discharge permit for RYAM that will lead to the elimination of the odor and dark color that currently fouls the river and dissuades fishing and recreational use of a remarkable and otherwise protected 60-mile river corridor from the RYAM discharge to the Georgia coast.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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