

2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



CONASAUGA RIVER

Forever Chemicals Continue to Poison Drinking Water Sources

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s, they were all the rage in home flooring, ushering in a golden era of carpet marketing and helping transform Dalton into Georgia's "Carpet Capitol of the World;" 30 years later those stain resistant carpets are the scourge of water providers in northwest Georgia and northeast Alabama. As it turned out the miracle chemicals that made the carpets impervious to wine and chocolate milk spills were also toxic. Researchers have found that PFAS, a group of man-made chemicals that persist in the environment, are linked to depressed immune systems, changes in liver enzymes and elevated cholesterol levels, hypertension in pregnant women and kidney and testicular cancer. While manufacturers have phased out production of some of these "forever chemicals," they continue to produce and Dalton's carpet manufacturers continue to use other forms of the chemicals. Dalton Utilities wastewater treatment system is incapable of removing the contaminants, and thus, PFAS continue to foul the Conasauga River, impacting downstream water users and the river's wildlife. Lawsuits filed against Dalton Utilities, PFAS manufacturers and Dalton carpet companies by downstream water utilities have resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in settlements. Those funds are now being used to rid drinking water of PFAS that originated more than 100 miles upstream.

THE WATER BODY

The Conasauga and the river it flows into, the Oostanaula, are known for their rich aquatic biodiversity. Part of the larger Upper Coosa River basin, no other river system in North America has a higher percentage of endemic species than does the Upper Coosa. Thirty species of mussels, snails, crayfishes and fishes can be found in the waters of the Coosa and nowhere else on Earth. Federally protected snails and mussels including the interrupted rocksnail, Coosa moccasinshell and Georgia pigtoe and fishes like the Conasauga logperch, trispot darter and amber darter all find homes there. In a recent study of some 300 river systems in 11 Southern states, the Conasauga ranked as the seventh most imperiled watershed because of its rich biodiversity. Northwest Georgia's and Northeast Alabama's human population is also dependent upon clean water flowing in these rivers. Rome, Georgia, along with Centre and Gadsden, Alabama all secure their drinking water from these streams originating in Northwest Georgia.



A popular paddling destination, the Conasauga River is tainted by an invisible toxin. While manufacturers have phased out some PFAS, there are some 9,000 different forms of PFAS, and they are still being used in the production of carpet in Dalton.

THE DIRT

In the 1930s as lab-created PFAS were emerging on the scene, the DuPont chemical company—one of the primary producers of PFAS—adopted the slogan “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry.” Now, the slogan—altered in popular culture to Better Living Through Chemistry—is painfully ironic. PFAS have joined a host of other chemicals once considered miracles that are now known health hazards.

Since the early 2000s, the manufacture of many PFAS has been phased out in the U.S., and in April, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set drinking water standards for six kinds of PFAS. But, the problem is there are some 9,000 different forms of PFAS, and they are still being used in the production of carpet in Dalton.

Many of these carpet factories treat their waste stream before sending to the public sewer system where it ultimately receives final treatment at Dalton Utilities’ Loopers Bend facility. Unfortunately, PFAS are not removed in either the manufacturer’s pretreatment process or at the public wastewater treatment facility.

Instead, wastewater containing PFAS is sprayed on forests and fields at Dalton Utilities’ 9,800-acre land application site which is surrounded on three sides by a five-mile oxbow of the Conasauga River known as Loopers Bend. From here, the PFAS find a path to the Conasauga.

The impacts to downstream water users have been costly. With the new EPA standards for PFAS in drinking water, water utilities are scrambling to find ways to remove the toxins. Rome, which recently reached a \$278 million settlement with Dalton Utilities, carpet manufacturers and PFAS manufacturers, is now building a new water treatment facility capable of removing PFAS that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars.



The city of Rome, some 100 miles downstream from Dalton, recently reached a \$278 million settlement with Dalton Utilities, carpet manufacturers and PFAS manufacturers, and is now building a new \$100 million drinking water treatment facility capable of removing PFAS.



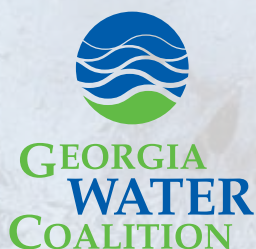
Though heavily impacted by industrial discharges, the Conasauga River is one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the country, harboring a host of federally protected fish, mussels and snails as well as more common fish like bronze darters.

For the rivers and streams and wildlife that call them home, however, there is no relief. Water tests conducted by the Coosa River Basin Initiative in 2023 showed PFAS levels immediately downstream from Loopers Bend more than 23 times EPA’s safe limit for drinking water.

While the pollution continues, Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division has been mostly passive in regulating the contaminants. No efforts have been made to require manufacturers to remove the chemicals from their waste stream or require Dalton Utilities to prevent the toxins from reaching the Conasauga.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

EPD must take a role in regulating PFAS and preventing them from entering the state’s rivers and streams. EPD must provide greater oversight of pretreatment permits, require companies to disclose the use of PFAS in manufacturing, and demand that water utilities remove these chemicals prior to discharging their wastewater.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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