

# 2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



## GEORGIA'S WATER

### State Makes Slow Progress in Limiting Algae-Causing Pollution

#### INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the death of a family pet as a result of ingesting cyanotoxins after playing at a popular recreation spot along the Chattahoochee River near Roswell shocked the public and underscored the dangers of high nutrient levels in our state's streams and rivers. When excess nitrogen and phosphorus enter these water bodies they interact with warm water to generate algae, including toxic cyanobacteria. What's more, this particular form of algae is indistinguishable from other non-toxic algae. But, all algae creates issues for our state's water. When the algae dies off it robs oxygen from the water, and if large enough, can cause fish kills. In short, high nutrients and high water temperatures kill. In Georgia, we have both. Unfortunately, progress toward identifying specific standards for nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the state's rivers and streams has been slow. While Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has set standards and developed "cleanup" plans for some of the state's major reservoirs, the agency has yet to establish standards for rivers, streams and estuaries as required by the federal Clean Water Act. Begun in 2004, the project to establish "nutrient criteria" for all of the state's water was expected to be completed by 2020.

#### THE WATER BODY

Georgia's major reservoirs are well known—Lanier, Allatoona, Oconee, Sinclair, Blue Ridge, Burton, Jackson, Russell, Clarks Hill and more—as recreation destinations. What many don't understand is that none of these reservoirs are natural water bodies. Virtually all of Georgia's ponds and lakes are man-made—the result of damming a stream or river. Thus, the health of these popular summer boating, fishing and swimming spots is dependent on the health of the water bodies flowing into them. There are more than 4,000 "large" reservoirs in Georgia, according to one U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study. The state's public reservoirs alone cover more than 400,000 acres. Wherever they exist they become economic drivers. For instance, Lakes Sinclair and Oconee have transformed Greene, Putnam, Morgan, Hancock and Baldwin counties into "Georgia's Lake Country." In 2021, Greene County, home of the Ritz Carlton Reynolds Plantation, saw \$124 million in visitor spending in large part thanks to Lake Oconee.



While naturally occurring, nitrogen and phosphorus in excessive amounts can do damage. They cause algal blooms that pose health risks to humans and can cause fish kills that harm the state's popular sport fisheries.



## THE DIRT

As catch basins, nutrients accumulate in Georgia's reservoirs. Recognizing this, over the past two decades, EPD has used its limited resources to set nutrient standards for these water bodies. Today specific nitrogen and phosphorus standards are in place for six large reservoirs—Allatoona, Carters, Jackson, Lanier, Walter F. George and West Point. But, EPD has not set similar standards for the state's other major reservoirs; nor has it done so for the state's streams and rivers.

Major stumbling blocks for the agency have been funding and staffing. When EPD updated its plan for adopting nutrient water quality standards in 2013, it set a goal of completing the standards by 2020, but it warned that success would depend upon "funding and staff resources."

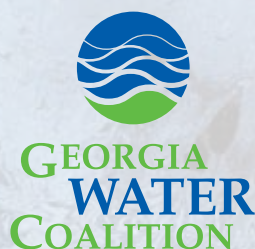
Adjusted for inflation, EPD's 2024 budget represents a cut of 30 percent over 2013 funding levels. Meanwhile state revenue surpluses have steadily increased, reaching \$16 billion by the end of fiscal year 2023.

EPD's total employment has dropped from close to 900 in 2009 to 719 at the end of fiscal year 2023. Retaining employees has also been a problem. Between 2009 and 2022, the agency's turnover rate climbed, peaking at nearly 20 percent in 2022.

Cost of living pay increases adopted by state leaders for this year's budget have helped drop employee exodus, but the agency still finds it difficult to compete with the private sector which can offer higher wages. The turnover rate and the need to train new employees has slowed advancement of some of EPD's programs, including the effort to monitor streams and develop instream standards for phosphorus and nitrogen pollution.



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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Algae pools along the shore of Lake Harding on the Chattahoochee River. When excess nitrogen and phosphorus enter Georgia's reservoirs, they interact with warm water to generate algae. Algae can cause fish kills and in some cases create toxic cyanobacteria that can be lethal to animals and humans.

Such pollution is inherently hard to eliminate or manage because it comes from so many diverse sources. Municipal and industrial wastewater treatment facilities are obvious sources, but less obvious are the nutrients that wash off urban streets, farm fields and other developed landscapes during rain events.

While naturally occurring, nitrogen and phosphorus in excessive amounts can do damage. They cause algal blooms that pose health risks to humans as well as aquatic wildlife. They also notably cause naturally occurring organic material like leaves and woody debris in streams to decompose more rapidly leaving less food and habitat for critters at the bottom of the aquatic food chain.

Finalizing instream standards for nitrogen and phosphorus will aid EPD in developing ways to reduce pollution levels and maintain the natural balance of nutrients needed for healthy streams.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

State leaders must provide EPD with the funds it needs to complete numeric nutrient standards as required by the federal Clean Water Act.