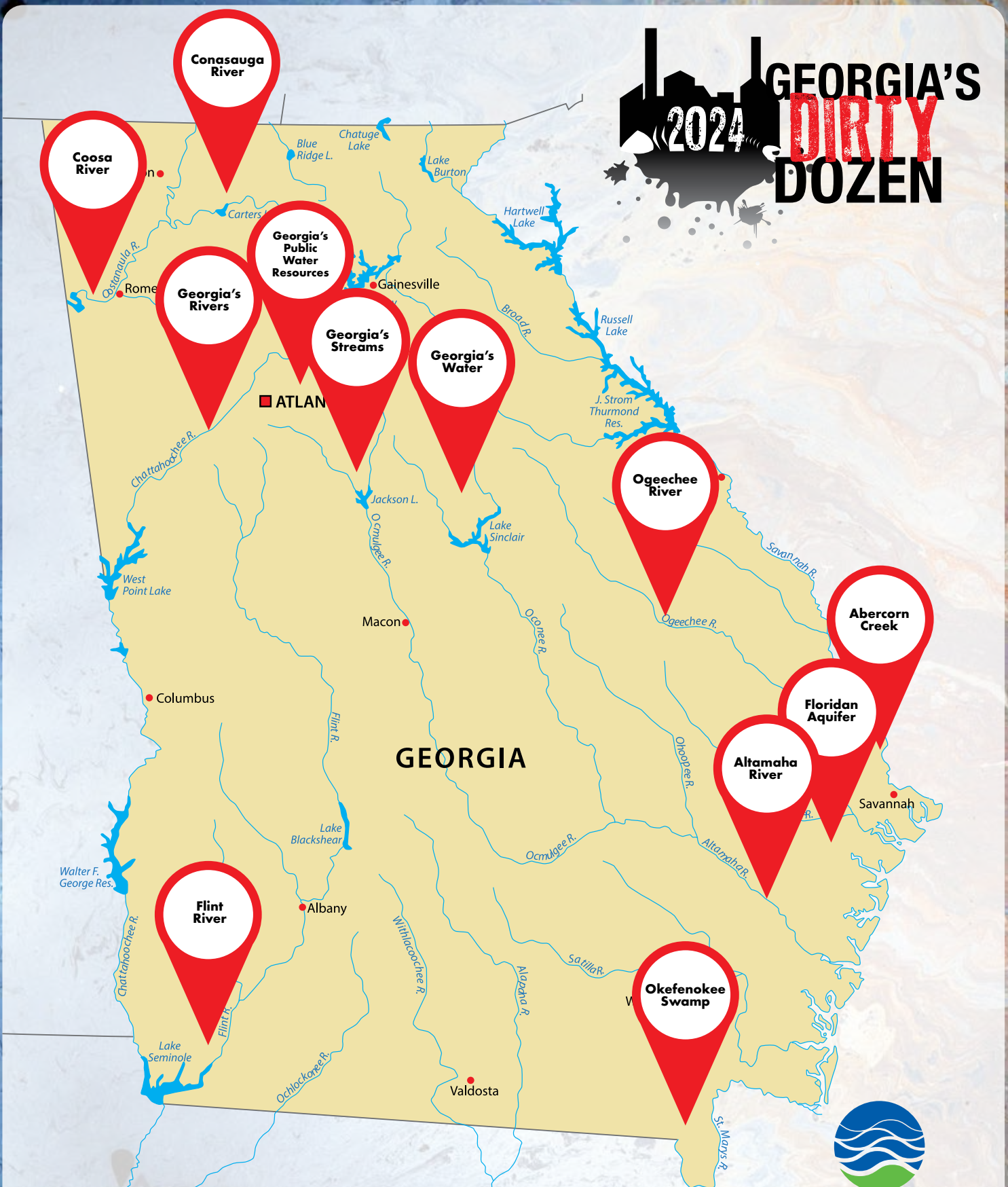
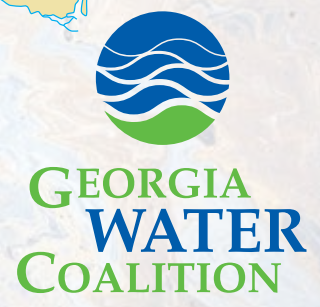




# 2024 GEORGIA'S DIRTY DOZEN



## 2024's Worst Offenses Against **GEORGIA'S WATER**



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## GEORGIA WATER COALITION'S DIRTY DOZEN

### A Call to Action

The Georgia Water Coalition's Dirty Dozen report highlights the politics, policies and issues that threaten the health of Georgia's water and the well being of more than 11 million Georgians.

The Dirty Dozen is not a list of the state's "most polluted places." Instead the report is a call to action for Georgia's leaders and its citizens to solve ongoing pollution problems, eliminate potential threats to Georgia's water and correct state and federal policies and actions that lead to polluted water.

Proudly, Georgia touts itself as the No. 1 state to do business, but that success in economic development is not without its consequences. When we fail to plan for growth; when we don't enforce existing laws to protect our water resources; and when we provide anemic funding for the state agency charged with protecting the state's natural resources, economic development inevitably impacts those resources upon which we all depend.

The deepening of the Savannah Harbor, completed in 2022, has ushered in a new era of megaships at the nation's third busiest port and spurred growth in surrounding coastal communities. This growth is threatening the region's surface and groundwater supplies on **Abercorn Creek** and in the **Floridan Aquifer**. With saltwater intrusion limiting withdrawals from the Floridan on the coast, communities are scrambling to find new water sources to meet the needs of developments like the massive Hyundai electric vehicle plant in Bryan County. Coordinated and enforceable water planning is sorely needed for the region.



This year's legislative session saw bills introduced that would have made it easier for private entities to claim ownership of some of the state's 400,000 acres of salt marshes. The bill was not passed, but raised a red flag as one of several measures aimed at privatizing the state's natural resources.



Georgia's rivers and streams, in addition to providing water for homes, businesses and industries, support an outdoor recreation economy that generates an estimated \$27.3 billion annually in consumer spending.

authority lured a massive monkey breeding facility to the community. When residents found out, the backlash was immediate. The "No Monkey Farm" signs cropping up around town shine a spotlight on the "monkey business" potential of local development authorities.

Economic growth means growing state revenues, and in recent years, state budget writers have been blessed with record budget surpluses. But, those surpluses have not made it to the principle state agency whose job it is to ensure that development does not dirty our state's natural resources.

Similarly, economic incentives adopted by the state to lure data centers to Georgia have led to unintended consequences for **Georgia's Rivers**. These massive facilities that enable our online lives and keep our digital data use tremendous amounts of energy and water. This year, Georgia Power Company successfully petitioned the Public Service Commission to tap fossil-fuel power sources to meet the unexpected energy demands of all the state's new data centers. State leaders need to rethink tax incentives for data centers, taking into consideration the state's available water and power resources.

In Southwest Georgia along the **Flint River**, the drive to lure new business to Georgia backfired on leaders in Decatur County and Bainbridge and highlighted the dangers of the blind pursuit of economic development at any costs by quasi-governmental development authorities. Without the public's knowledge, the local development



The discharge from the RYAM pulp mill in Jesup discolors the Altamaha River. Georgia's Environmental Protection Division is poised to issue a permit for the facility that will allow this kind of discharge to continue.

Adjusted for inflation, the budget for Georgia's Environmental Protection Division has been slashed by 30 percent from 2013 to 2024. Over the past two decades as the state's population has grown by some three million and state revenues have more than doubled, EPD's staff has shrunk by about 150 employees. The agency has about 12 employees whose responsibility it is to inspect sites and enforce erosion and sedimentation laws statewide in some 380 jurisdictions. Predictably, the result is anemic enforcement of state laws designed to prevent dirt from development sites from soiling **Georgia's Streams** and adjacent property.

Similarly, a more than two-decade-long effort by the agency to development nutrient standards for the state's rivers and streams has still not been completed, in part because of lack of funding and staff. High levels of nitrogen and phosphorus in **Georgia's Water** has led to dangerous algal blooms at numerous popular water recreation destinations around the state. State leaders must give EPD the resources it needs to do its job.

This year's Dirty Dozen also highlights emerging pollutants. PFAS, a group of man-made chemicals that persist in the environment, were once thought of as modern miracles because of their ability to make fabric stain resistant and fire retardant (among other things), but over the last two decades, we've discovered these chemicals are hazardous to our health. Today, they are found everywhere, but especially in the **Conasauga River** and **Ogeechee River** where they were used by carpet and textile manufacturers. Though use of many PFAS has been phased out, they are still being used and they are still polluting our rivers and contaminating our fish. Georgia must act to force users of PFAS to prevent them from reaching our rivers and begin testing fish so subsistence anglers can be warned of any potential dangers of eating these wild-caught fish.

Three pollution problems make return appearances on this year's Dirty Dozen. On the **Altamaha River**, discharges from a Jesup pulp mill still sully the river, impacting the use and enjoyment of Georgia's "Little Amazon" by boaters and anglers. On the **Coosa River**, a closed coal ash pond at Georgia Power Company's shuttered Plant Hammond still pollutes groundwater, and on the outskirts of the **Okefenokee Swamp** in Charlton County, mining remains a threat because of the General Assembly's failure to take action to protect Georgia's global natural wonder.

Finally, the report notes a troubling trend in Georgia water policy: the move to privatize **Georgia's Water Resources**. During this year's legislative session, a measure was introduced that would have made it easier for private entities to claim ownership of the state's marshlands, virtually all of which have been held in the "public trust" by the state for generations. Other measures that were introduced and passed included a bill allowing privately-owned water providers to circumvent local water plans and a bill that could lead to some waterfront property owners asserting ownership of the streambed and prohibiting individuals from stopping to fish in front of their property.

Addressing the issues highlighted in this report through stronger funding and enforcement for clean water laws, legislative action, sound permitting and policy decisions by state and federal agencies and critical water resource planning at the regional level will ultimately lead to cleaner, healthier streams, rivers, lakes and estuaries. Of course, responsible actions by individuals, businesses, industries and local governments are also critical to solving these pollution problems.

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 260 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of Georgians.



Despite overwhelming public support for protecting the Okefenokee Swamp from mining threats, Georgia's General Assembly passed no legislation to do so during this year's legislative session. More than 70,000 citizens sent letters and e-mails to Georgia's Environmental Protection Division asking the agency to stop a proposed heavy mineral sands mine in Charlton County.

