

2024's Worst Offenses Against GEORGIA'S WATER



OGEECHEE RIVER

Toxic “Forever Chemicals” Taint Fish; Threaten Human Health

INTRODUCTION

In Georgia our wild fish are subject to toxins that make some of this wild game dangerous to eat on a regular basis. Tests conducted by state scientists have found toxins like mercury, PCBs and chlordane in fish, and as a result, the state issues consumption advisories annually for specific fish and water bodies. Recently, another toxin in fish has been identified—PFAS, the acronym for per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances. Lab-created beginning in the 1930s, these chemicals have been used for years to manufacture carpet, upholstery, food paper wrappings and flame retardant apparel, among other things. PFAS have been linked to a number of health risks including cancer as well as impacts to immune systems and cholesterol levels. Known as “forever chemicals” because they do not breakdown and persist in the environment, they are now found in rivers across Georgia, especially the Ogeechee and Conasauga where they were extensively used by manufacturers and then discharged to the rivers. Once in rivers, PFAS contaminate the smallest organisms and then bioaccumulate up the food chain, poisoning top-tier predators like fish and fowl. While the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in April issued standards for PFAS in drinking water, no such safe standards have been issued for PFAS levels in fish. Nor has Georgia’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) begun testing fish tissue for PFAS. Failure to obtain data on PFAS levels in Georgia’s wild fish will delay the process of creating consumption advisories and put those Georgians who eat wild-caught fish at greater risk of these toxic chemicals.

THE WATER BODY

The 245-mile long Ogeechee River is one of Georgia’s last remaining free flowing rivers. A blackwater beauty, it runs through Eastern Georgia, draining a 5,540 square-mile basin that encompasses wetlands, forests, farms, and scores of towns and cities. Within that basin, thousands of Georgians rely on the river and its tributaries for fish to feed their families, and the underlying aquifer for their drinking water. The Ogeechee also supports a diversity of wildlife, offers countless recreational opportunities, supplies water for agricultural and industrial uses, and carries off wastewater. Notably, it is home to several protected species, including the endangered Atlantic and shortnose sturgeons which spawn in its tea-colored water during the winter and early spring.



Georgia is home to millions of anglers. Many catch and release, but others depend on wild-caught fish for a portion of their regular diet. For those anglers, the health risks of eating fish contaminated with PFAS are exaggerated.

THE DIRT

When they were created, we considered them miracles of modern science. PFAS made carpet stain resistant and clothing flame retardant. On the Ogeechee River, a textile manufacturer specializing in flame retardant fabrics discharged PFAS to the river for years. Though that plant is now closed, PFAS persist in the river. In 2020, Ogeechee Riverkeeper tested bass, bluegill and redbreast harvested from the river and found PFAS in all fish tested.

This is particularly alarming given the number of recreational and subsistence anglers that depend on the Ogeechee for a portion of their diet. Consumed infrequently and in small quantities, fish tainted with toxins pose marginal risks. But, for those regularly consuming wild-caught fish—typically low-income families that depend on these catches for a portion of their diet—the risks are exaggerated. Children and pregnant women are at greater risk. In one study, a cohort of Central New York anglers who regularly ate wild-caught fish had levels of certain PFAS in their blood up to 25 times greater than the national average.

Currently, EPA is conducting studies on PFAS levels in fish and developing guidance to enable states to develop consumption advisories, but the agency's "PFAS Strategic Roadmap" is running months behind schedule. Drinking water standards, originally expected to be finalized in late 2023, were just released in April.



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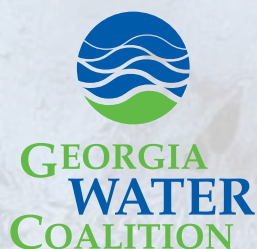
Once in rivers, PFAS contaminate the smallest organisms and then bioaccumulate up the food chain, poisoning top-tier predators like fish and fowl, including this fish-eating cormorant.

And while manufacturers of PFAS have phased out production of some of the most toxic PFAS known, thousands of other varieties are still in use.

At the state level, Georgia's Department of Natural Resources has conducted limited monitoring of PFAS levels in the state's rivers and has not yet conducted any testing of tissue from fish harvested from the state's rivers. Based on results of nationwide tests, it is likely that PFAS contamination exists in virtually all of Georgia's rivers.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

To speed the process of developing fish consumption guidelines and protect recreational and subsistence anglers consuming wild-caught fish, DNR should begin testing fish statewide for PFAS. When EPA finally issues its guidance, the delay in developing guidelines can be minimized.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Damon Mullis, Ogeechee Riverkeeper,
866-942-6222, damon@ogeecheeriverkeeper.org