



2024 DIRTY DOZEN REPORT

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For more information about specific Dirty Dozen sites view the report at:

<https://www.gawater.org/resources/dirty-dozen>

For Immediate Release May 9, 2024: Today, Georgia’s leading water advocacy organizations released their “Dirty Dozen” for 2024 in a 27-page report highlighting 12 of the worst offenses to Georgia’s waters. The report can be viewed at <https://www.gawater.org/resources/dirty-dozen>.

Rather than identifying the “most polluted places” in Georgia, the Georgia Water Coalition’s (GWC) Dirty Dozen report instead 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 list includes the following:

- **Abercorn Creek (Effingham/Chatham counties):** Growth spurred by Port of Savannah threatens region’s water supplies
- **Altamaha River (Wayne County):** State allows pulp mill to continue polluting Georgia’s “Little Amazon.”
- **Conasauga River (Whitfield County):** Forever chemicals continue to poison drinking water sources.
- **Coosa River (Floyd County):** Plan for coal ash cleanup pollutes groundwater
- **Flint River (Decatur County):** Monkey breeding facility exposes “monkey business” potential of local development authorities.
- **Floridan Aquifer (South Georgia):** Growth in coastal counties stresses fragile water supply.
- **Georgia’s Rivers, Streams, and Water Resources (Statewide):**
 - Data centers sap energy grid, stress water supplies.
 - Lax enforcement of state laws allows dirt from development sites to soil creeks.
 - State makes slow progress on limiting algae-causing pollution
 - Push to privatize public resources raises red flags.
- **Ogeechee River:** Toxic “forever chemicals” taint fish, threaten human health.
- **Okefenokee Swamp:** State leaders’ inaction leaves natural wonder at risk.

Proudly, Georgia touts itself as the No. 1 state to do business, but that success in economic development is not without its consequences. Failure to plan for growth; to enforce existing laws to protect our water resources; and to provide adequate funding for the state agency charged with protecting the state's environment has inevitably led to impacts to 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.

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 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 unaccountable 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.

Adjusted for inflation, the budget for Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) 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 responsible for inspecting sites and enforcing erosion and sedimentation laws statewide in some 380 jurisdictions. Predictably, at both the state and local level,

the result is anemic enforcement of laws designed to prevent dirt from development sites from soiling **Georgia's Streams** and adjacent property.

Similarly, a more than 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 companies to circumvent local water plans along the Georgia coast and a bill that could lead to some waterfront property owners asserting their 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.