



Georgia Water Coalition names “Dirty Dozen” exposing the 12 worst offenses to Georgia’s water

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Individual contacts for each site on the dirty dozen list are available at:
www.garivers.org/gawater/dirtydozen.htm

For Release: Saturday, November 05, 2011 - On Saturday, Georgia’s leading water protection group named its “Dirty Dozen” for 2011, exposing the worst offenses to Georgia’s water. The sites range from a coal-fired power plant in northwest Georgia to a pulp mill in southeast Georgia.

The Georgia Water Coalition, a consortium of more than 180 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations representing more than 300,000 Georgians, announced the list at a celebration marking the Coalition’s 10th year of advocating for clean water.

“This is more than a list,” said Jerry McCollum, president of the Georgia Wildlife Federation and a founding member of the Coalition. “This is a call to action for Georgia’s citizens and its leaders. The sites populating this list are only poster children for the larger problem of a system that is failing to protect our water, our fish and wildlife and our communities.”

Topping the list is the Ogeechee River where a textile manufacturing plant in Screven County is blamed for a fish kill earlier this year in which 30,000 fish perished. Rayonier’s pulp mill in Jesup, the proposed Savannah River Harbor deepening project, minimum flows on the Chattahoochee in Atlanta, reservoir proposals in Dawson and Hall counties, and a proposed coal-fired power plant near Sandersville rounded out the top six.

The depletion of flows on the Flint River from Hartsfield Airport to Lake Seminole ranked seventh on the list, followed by the destruction of coastal marshes from Savannah to Kingsland, the loss of wetlands areas in South Georgia, fish kills on creeks near Augusta and Milledgeville linked to kaolin processing, a waste disposal site near Elberton and a coal-fired power plant on the Coosa River near Rome.

The Coalition's full report details the history of each site and provides solutions to correct these ongoing pollution problems and eliminate the listed threats. It is available online at: <http://www.garivers.org/gawater/dirtydozen.htm>

The Coalition blames continuing funding cuts to Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) and a lack of political will to aggressively enforce state and federal environmental laws and implement state policy that better protects and manages Georgia's water.

Since 2008, EPD has seen its funding slashed by 44 percent, on the heels of steady cuts of around 40% since the 1980s, but the Coalition asserts that political cronyism also plays a part in the agency's failure to enforce laws.

At least half of the 18 citizens serving on the Governor-appointed DNR Board, which oversees EPD, have ties to business interests that are directly or indirectly regulated by EPD; yet there are no full-time environmental advocates, scientists or biologists serving on the board. Even the current EPD Director, Allen Barnes, was previously a partner at a law firm that represents regulated industries, some of which are on the Dirty Dozen list.

"Too often in Georgia, the fox is watching the hen house," said Sally Bethea, Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, a former member of the DNR Board who was removed during a purge in 2007 that also eliminated three other dedicated conservationists. "Some of the problems on this list have been happening for decades, and the agency that is supposed to fix the problems can't, or won't. The failures go deeper than lack of funding."

The Dirty Dozen list was compiled by the Coalition after taking nominations from member groups across the state. This is the first such list, and the Coalition will update it annually as problems are addressed and as new problems arise. The full report can be viewed at: <http://www.garivers.org/gawater/dirtydozen.htm>

The list includes:

1. Ogeechee River: Polluter Devastates Ogeechee for Five Years and Goes Undetected by EPD

For five years, King America Finishing Co. (KAF) has discharged toxic substances to the Ogeechee River without the state's knowledge or approval. Even while citizens complained to Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) about the plant's discharge, and while EPD personnel inspected the textile manufacturing plant, the pollution continued unabated. EPD's failure to protect the Ogeechee led in May 2011 to the death of an estimated 33,000 fish—the largest known fish kill in state history. Not only did EPD fail to discover the problems at the facility, EPD failed to adequately warn the public of the health dangers following the spill. Adding insult to injury, subsequent actions taken

against the facility excluded public input and did not even require immediate compliance with the law. After the kill was discovered, it took EPD several days to warn the public and almost a month to instruct the company to stop the dumping. EPD could have fined the company up to \$90 million for violating clean water laws; instead EPD required the company to spend just \$1 million on yet-to-be-named environmental projects in the area.

2. Altamaha River: Rayonier Pulp Mill Discharge Destroys Fisheries

For over a half century Rayonier's Jesup pulp mill has discharged noxious waste into the state's largest river, the Altamaha, that fouls the river for miles, completely altering its character by turning the water black and pulpy and emitting a rancid odor. Fisheries, including the river's once prosperous commercial shad fishery, have been severely damaged. White sandbars are stained brown. Fishermen catch seemingly healthy fish only to find them reeking of nauseating pulp mill odors when they begin to clean them. Despite years of promises, EPD and Rayonier have failed to eliminate the mess and restore Georgia's "Little Amazon." Recent actions suggest that eliminating the mess appears to have taken a back seat to expanding the company's product line and profits. The time for promises is over; after years of allowing the pollution to continue, EPD must demand that Rayonier clean up its mess.

3. Savannah River: Costly Harbor Dredging Wrecks Savannah River Estuary

Harbor deepening projects on the Savannah during the past century have destroyed two-thirds of the 12,000 acres of the rare and ecologically important tidal freshwater wetlands now contained in the Savannah River National Wildlife Refuge. Now, the Georgia Ports Authority and EPD are supporting a harbor deepening plan that will allow saltwater to push further up the Savannah River, irreversibly degrading river ecosystems. The project is expected to destroy another 20 percent of the remaining refuge wetlands, vastly increase the cost of clean drinking water in Savannah and place several fish species in further jeopardy. Meanwhile, the \$600 million taxpayer project is not predicted to increase commerce at Savannah's port or create any new jobs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should conduct an analysis of all potential port expansions in the Southeast to determine what sites can be developed at the least cost to the environment and federal taxpayers.

4. Chattahoochee River: Critical Minimum Flow Neglected at Atlanta

In the 1970s, EPD established a minimum flow standard of 750 cubic feet per second (cfs) in the Chattahoochee at Peachtree Creek to dilute discharges from sewage treatment plants in metro Atlanta and protect the health of the river. EPD has never provided real-time monitoring at this critical location, however, making compliance impossible to verify. In addition, EPD has not conducted a comprehensive, scientific study to confirm that the 750 cfs flow standard established more than 30 years ago is still adequate to protect Georgia's most

heavily-used river, particularly in light of growing demands placed on the waterway. To ensure protection of the Chattahoochee, EPD must fund real-time water monitoring stations and conduct a comprehensive study to confirm, or recommend revision to, the minimum flow requirements to protect all downstream users.

5. Shoal Creek and Flat Creek: Unnecessary Reservoirs Threaten Downstream Communities, Endangered Species and Public Coffers

With a combined construction price of nearly \$1 billion, the Glades Reservoir on Flat Creek in Hall County and the Shoal Creek Reservoir in neighboring Dawson County illustrate what is wrong with Georgia's strategy to "drought proof" metro Atlanta. Glades Reservoir involves building a dam to create an amenity lake for a residential development masquerading as a water supply reservoir. It will siphon massive quantities of water from the Chattahoochee River immediately upstream of Lake Lanier. The Shoal Creek project would destroy the last stronghold of federally protected fish species found nowhere else in the world and would deplete the Etowah River through a massive water transfer to Metro Atlanta, depriving Lake Allatoona and downstream communities of critical water flows. Backers of these reservoirs are using their influence to push the state to invest in unnecessary projects at great expense instead of directing limited financial resources to conservation and efficiency projects and better management of existing reservoirs that will secure the most water for the least amount of money in the least amount of time.

6. Oconee & Ogeechee Rivers: Speculative Coal Plant Permitted Even Though it is Unneeded and Will Harm Water, Air and Fisheries

Airborne mercury from coal-fired power plants is the leading cause of mercury contamination in fish in south Georgia streams. In fact, fish in most south Georgia streams contain mercury in high enough levels to cause birth defects in babies whose mothers eat too many of these fish. State advisories encourage residents to limit consumption of these fish. Still, EPD has issued permits for a speculative coal-fired power plant in Washington County that will not only spew more mercury to our air and water, but will also deplete flows on the already-stressed Oconee River. While EPD has failed to protect Georgians from this unnecessary power plant, a grassroots effort is underway to stop the plant's biggest investor, Cobb Electric Membership Corporation, from proceeding with the venture.

7. Flint River: Flint River Sucked Dry as EPD Allows Too Many Withdrawals

Since 1980, low flows on the upper Flint River have declined 50-70 percent; while flows on the lower Flint have dropped by around 30 percent. Today, summertime flows are routinely so low you can't even float a kayak down the upper reaches of this river, and several major tributaries in the lower Flint

completely dry up. From its headwaters beneath Atlanta's airport to its confluence with the Chattahoochee River in southwest Georgia, the Flint is being sucked dry by EPD's out-of-control permitting practices for municipal drinking water, agricultural withdrawals and interbasin transfers. Water taken from the river needs to be returned and robust conservation measures for municipal, industrial and agricultural water users should be implemented.

8. Coastal Wetlands: Docks in Georgia's Tidal Wetlands Spoil the "Marshes of Glynn"

Our coastal marshes that Sidney Lanier celebrated in one of Georgia's best known poems are now under attack by development that has been allowed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Georgia's Coastal Resources Division (CRD) and the Governor-appointed Coastal Marshlands Protection Committee. These federal and state entities have permitted the construction of thousands of docks in Georgia's 450,000 acres of tidal marshes. These docks can stretch for hundreds of yards into the marshes and often alter and kill marsh vegetation, turning these productive wetlands into barren mud flats. At stake is critical habitat for nearly 70 percent of marine species. Based on past studies, the value of Georgia's marshes is well over \$5 billion annually in ecosystem services. The permitting system for docks and marinas should acknowledge these services and preserve their value.

9. South Georgia Wetlands: Four Decades of Ditches Dry Out South Georgia Wetlands

Since the 1970s, state and federal regulatory agencies have allowed the destruction of more than 200,000 acres of highly critical wetlands throughout South Georgia to increase timber production and agricultural yields and usher in residential and commercial development. These wetlands that captured water and slowly released it to streams no longer perform that important function. The result has been increased floods when it rains and record low flows when it doesn't—and ultimately a sharp reduction in the harvest of crabs and brown shrimp in Georgia's coastal waters. State and federal authorities need to invest in restoration efforts and cease careless approval of projects that destroy Georgia's last remaining wetlands.

10. Broad River: Waste Disposal "Farm" Fouls the Broad River

Just upstream from popular Clarks Hill Lake and one of North Georgia's favorite paddling paths on the Broad River, Broad River Valley Farms (BRVF) each week spreads approximately 30 tractor trailer loads of waste—including livestock excrement, animal parts and grease to its 800 acres of land adjacent to the Broad River. Neighbors have been chased from their homes because of the stench, and rains wash the waste directly into the river. Yet to date, EPD has not acted to regulate the facility or require its operator to conduct any water monitoring to ensure the site is not polluting the Broad. EPD must investigate this site and correct polluted stormwater discharges.

11. Brier & Commissioner Creeks: Fish Dying In Kaolin Country and EPD Doesn't Know Why

In September and October, strange things started happening on two middle Georgia creeks--Commissioner Creek in Wilkinson County east of Macon and Brier Creek in Burke County just south of Augusta. These streams began changing color. On Commissioner the water turned blue-green; on Brier the creek turned "milk chocolate" and then cleared. Shortly there after, fish started dying on both streams. More than 10,000 fish perished. To date, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has not identified the cause of the fish kills, but the incidents both have one thing in common—they occurred in the heart of Georgia's kaolin country and both creeks receive wastewater from kaolin mines or processing facilities. The Savannah and Altamaha Riverkeepers who investigated found the creeks exhibited characteristics commonly associated with contamination by aluminum sulfate—a chemical compound used in kaolin processing facilities. Improved management practices and stronger EPD oversight of the kaolin industry are needed to prevent future tragedies.

12. Coosa River: Coal-fired Power Plant's Water Withdrawal and Heated Water Discharge Threaten River's Health

In the late summer, when residents turn up their air conditioners and the Coosa River is at its lowest, Georgia Power's Plant Hammond burns coal to keep residents cool—and withdraws up to 590 million gallons a day from the river. During times of drought when river flows dip as low as 460 million gallons a day, the river literally flows upstream at the plant's intake pipes. Used to cool the coal plant's operating system, the water is discharged back to the river at higher temperatures that degrade water quality. Plant Hammond, built prior to the passage of the federal Clean Water Act, is one of a handful of old coal-fired power plants around the state that still uses out-dated cooling methods. EPD should require facilities to eliminate these massive withdrawals and oxygen-depleting discharges.