



RIVERCHAT

Winter/Spring 2023

A publication of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (CRK)

SOYBEAN SCARE: COMBATting AN UNLIKELY POLLUTANT

An industrial accident in the summer of 2022 underscored the importance of timely and complete responses to spills in minimizing further impacts on the surrounding environment. On July 29, three Norfolk Southern rail cars overturned and dumped their loads of soybeans into the headwaters of Flat Creek in Gainesville, Georgia. The spill was originally restricted to the site of the accident, but piles of soybeans remained uncontained on site for more than a week until storms swept them at least two miles downstream toward Lake Lanier.

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper was notified of this incident by a hotline call reporting soybeans piling up in areas of Flat Creek. Soybeans are an unusual source of water quality problems, but bacteria consumed the beans like any other form of organic matter and the resulting decomposition used up the stream's limited supply of dissolved oxygen (DO). Without adequate DO, fish and macroinvertebrate life are unable to survive.

Upon investigation, CRK staff measured DO levels of under 1 mg/L in upper Flat Creek, far below the state standard of 5 mg/L. The low level of DO was measured throughout 3.5 miles of the stream and in some areas remained low for more than a month. The decomposing soybeans also released nitrogen and phosphorus into Flat Creek, which already suffers from excess nutrient inputs from many other industrial and municipal sources.

Approximately 100 dead mosquito fish and bluegill were observed in the mile below the spill, but the actual toll was likely much higher because piles of soybeans and turbid water hid all but the fish floating on the surface. CRK immediately called the Wildlife Resources Department and the Georgia Environmental Protection Division's Emergency Response

team, kicking off a two-month cleanup effort by Norfolk Southern and their contractors, Marion Environmental, Inc.

These efforts included pumping the saturated soybeans out of the stream into de-watering boxes, hauling away more than 440 tons of solids, and placing aerators along the stream temporarily to alleviate low DO levels.

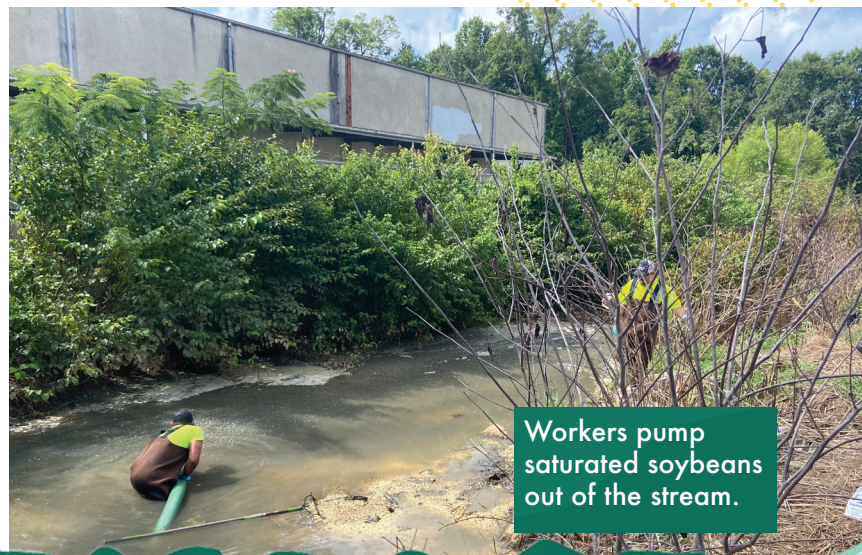
While DO levels have returned to normal, the Georgia EPD and Norfolk Southern continue to negotiate a consent order that will reflect the damage caused by the spill. Preventing high levels of nutrients flowing to Lake Lanier is a major focus of CRK's efforts.

If you observe a water quality problem in the watershed, please report it as soon as possible through our website or by calling our offices.

On July 29, three Norfolk Southern rail cars overturned and dumped their loads of soybeans into the headwaters of Flat Creek in Gainesville, Georgia.



Photos courtesy of Scott Rogers and The Gainesville Times



Workers pump saturated soybeans out of the stream.

Thank you for supporting our efforts to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River.

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REFLECTIONS: A SALUTE TO OUR NWW VOLUNTEERS



Rain or shine, Mrs. Wallace was devoted to collecting her samples to protect the creek and community where she lived her entire life.

samples to our laboratory. This data has been used to track and stop more than 130 sources of pollution to these communities.

One of our most dedicated volunteers has been Mrs. Juanita Wallace, who

Non-profit organizations come in many forms and tackle a variety of missions, from animal rescue to social services to environmental protection. Some may be a one-person operation and others may have hundreds of staff. But one thing that all these operations have in common is that they cannot accomplish their missions without the help of devoted community volunteers. Chattahoochee Riverkeeper is no exception.

I remember back in 2010 when I was trying to get a new bacteria-monitoring program off the ground. There were dozens of polluted streams flowing through local neighborhoods and parks, and we did not have the water quality data that we needed to track the pollution sources. We had a lab, but not enough staff to routinely collect the needed samples. The solution – volunteers! That marked the birth of the Neighborhood Water Watch (NWW) program, which has since engaged an army of volunteers to collect and deliver more than 45,000

for nearly a decade collected weekly samples from locations along Proctor Creek in Northwest Atlanta. Rain or shine, Mrs. Wallace was devoted to collecting her samples to protect the creek and community where she lived her entire life.

We were all heartbroken when we learned of her passing several months ago. We will miss Mrs. Wallace’s smile as she dropped off her samples and shared a report on how the creek looked that day. Like all of our devoted volunteers, she was a true community advocate, and we are deeply appreciative of her efforts. We absolutely could not do the work that we do without our volunteers, and because of Mrs. Wallace and the rest of our volunteer army, the Chattahoochee is now cleaner than it has been in a very long time.

JASON ULSETH
JASON ULSETH, RIVERKEEPER

FACES OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE: LIANA CHAPMAN

“Like many others, I began volunteering at CRK during the pandemic. It allowed me to be outdoors and provide a service that would impact millions of people. I was immediately hooked after my first cleanup at Tanyard Creek Park in September 2021. To see the transformation of all the trash and debris removed is joyful and disheartening at the same time. And it only takes a few hours to see such a large impact. I will continue to do my part, every chance I can, and hopefully bring a few friends along with me.”



Since 2021, Liana Chapman has volunteered at 13 cleanup events.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER



ON PATROL WITH CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER

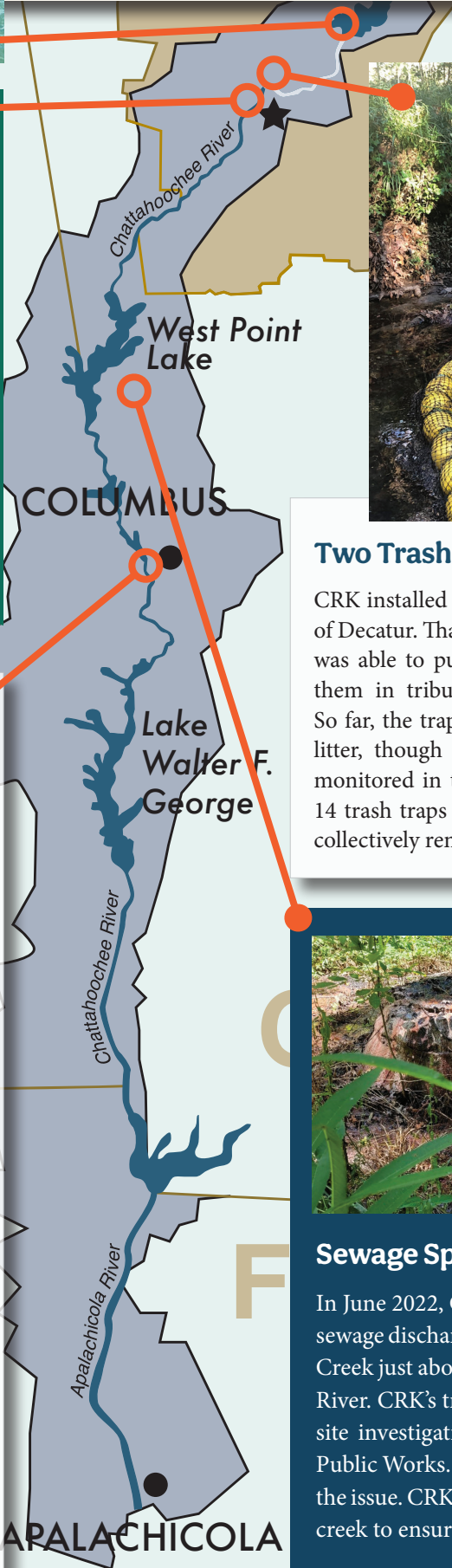


Monitoring Nutrient Pollution in Lake Lanier

Every year between April and October, CRK monitors the algae levels in Lake Lanier, the consequence of excess nitrogen and phosphorous pollution to the lake. Our 2022 results reveal continued violations of water quality standards at all five sites for which standards exist. Sources of nutrient pollution to the lake include fertilizer runoff, failing septic systems, and treated wastewater. CRK remains active in advocating for lower nutrient inflows through the Lake Lanier Stakeholders group, via the regulatory permitting process, and working with government agencies and community partners.

Sewage Spill on Tanyard Creek Solved

While conducting field investigations in upper sections of Tanyard Creek, CRK identified a sewer spill pouring from a manhole and stormwater pipe. The source was identified as a privately maintained sewage lift station, which has caused spills and fish kills on at least two other occasions. Neighborhood Water Watch data, on-the-ground inspections, and real-time read-outs from our CASSI meter have been integral in identifying this ongoing issue. We notified the City of Atlanta, and the sewage flow has now stopped. The City and CRK are maintaining regular contact as we work to resolve the issue permanently.



Two Trash Traps Debut in Decatur

CRK installed two “boom-style” trash traps in the City of Decatur. Thanks to a recent grant from the City, CRK was able to purchase two Watergoat traps and install them in tributaries of South Fork Peachtree Creek. So far, the traps have removed a few dozen pounds of litter, though their performance will continue to be monitored in the coming months. CRK now operates 14 trash traps in the Chattahoochee watershed, which collectively removed 3,300 lbs. of litter in 2022.



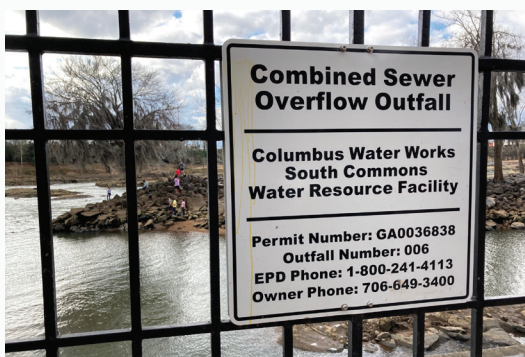
Columbus Water Works Continues to Appeal

When heavy rains hit Columbus, the combined sewer system discharges stormwater and sewage from approximately 12 pipes into the Chattahoochee River near the highly recreated whitewater course. In 2018, the Georgia EPD proposed new permit limits to protect water quality. After much review and comment, the permit was issued in 2020, but then Columbus Water Works (CWW) challenged the permit and CRK intervened alongside EPD. An administrative law judge upheld the permit; so did a superior court judge. Now, on appeal again before the Georgia Court of Appeals, we are waiting for the Court to issue a briefing schedule after which there may be oral arguments and a decision.



Sewage Spill into Oseligee Creek

In June 2022, CRK received a report of an unpermitted sewage discharge into an unnamed tributary of Oseligee Creek just above its confluence with the Chattahoochee River. CRK's trackers confirmed the spill with tests and site investigations then promptly notified West Point Public Works. A response team was deployed to resolve the issue. CRK continues to monitor water quality in the creek to ensure public and aquatic health is protected.



2022 ACCOMPLISHMENTS by the NUMBERS

WATER MONITORING

6,716 Neighborhood Water Watch samples collected and tested

164 NWW volunteers and partners

5 CASSI devices collecting real time water quality data

405 Hotline calls and sites investigated

2 PFAS samples tested in national WKA study

19 Spills found and stopped by NWW

133 Nutrient samples tested from lakes Lanier and West Point

82 BacteriALERT samples from the CRNRA tested



208
NWW SITES
TESTED
WEEKLY



ADVOCACY

35 Permit comment letters and testimonials before government agencies to maintain and advance environmental laws



96 Industrial sites investigated for compliance with stormwater rules



A TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE

45 Volunteer cleanup events

6 TONS RECYCLED

2,335 Volunteers

14 Instream trash traps in operation

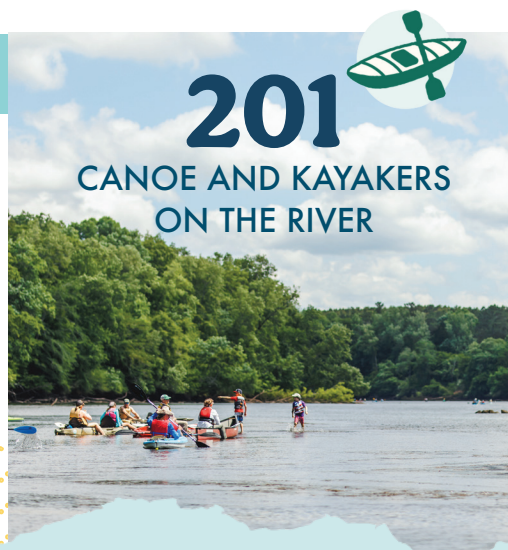
55 Tons of trash removed

OUTREACH

1,581 New members

46 Community events and festivals

375 RAIN BARRELS DISTRIBUTED



201

CANOE AND KAYAKERS
ON THE RIVER



EDUCATION



4,017 Students and teachers on board the floating classrooms

242 Participants of the Becca Sue Klein All Kids Fish

125 Industrial operators educated

21 Interns trained

96 WATER WARRIORS ENGAGED

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SUPPORT A HEALTHY CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper is the only nonprofit organization dedicated entirely to protecting and preserving the Chattahoochee River for all the people and wildlife that depend on it. Through a variety of highly effective programs like those shared in this edition of RiverCHAT, CRK and its members have had a positive impact on the Chattahoochee watershed since its founding in 1994.

You can help fund these and more initiatives to sustain a healthy river for years to come by making a donation today.



SCAN TO DONATE

Visit
<https://chattahoochee.org/donate/>
or text CRK to 41444 to donate.



SAVE THE DATE

FOR THIS YEAR’S MAJOR EVENTS



SWEEP THE HOOCH

MARCH 25

50+ cleanup sites throughout the Chattahoochee watershed

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MAY 6 HELEN
AUGUST 5 ATLANTA
OCTOBER 21 HELEN



WaterFEST

WATERFEST

APRIL 22
GAINESVILLE

29TH ANNUAL PATRON CELEBRATION

SEPTEMBER 22
ATLANTA



LET’S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER.

More than five million people rely on the Chattahoochee River and it’s our hope that Chattahoochee Riverkeeper’s membership reflects the diversity of the communities we serve. You can help us understand our members better by completing this five-minute anonymous survey. You’ll also have the opportunity to provide feedback on our work and this newsletter.

Visit <https://chattahoochee.org/feedback-survey/> or text CRKDEI to 41444 to learn more.



SCAN FOR SURVEY

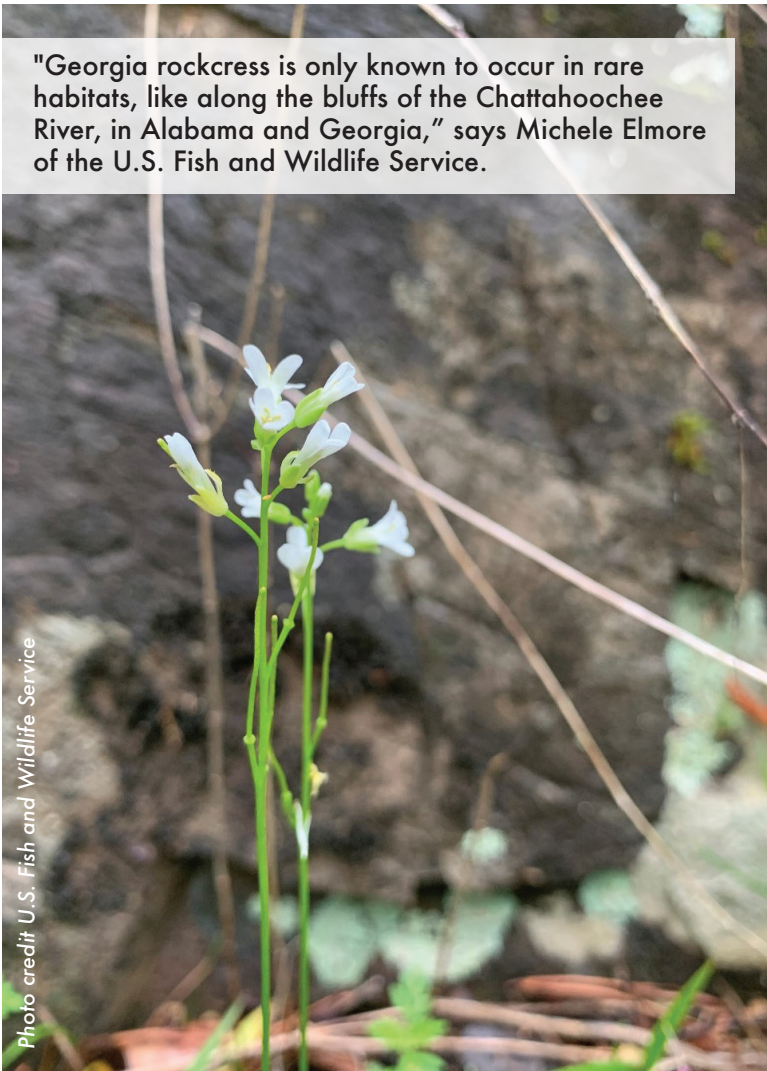
GEORGIA ROCKCRESS: A RARE FLOWER WORTH PROTECTING

Georgia rockcress (*Arabis georgiana*) is a rare and endangered flowering plant in the cabbage family that is native to the southeast United States. It can only be found in Alabama and Georgia, where it grows on rocky cliffs and slopes in floodplains. This herbaceous plant grows to approximately eight inches tall and has small white or pinkish flowers that bloom in the spring. It is often found growing in dense clusters, with small oval-shaped leaves and a woody stem.

With less than 25 isolated populations documented, this species is at risk of extinction due to habitat destruction, erosion, and the encroachment of non-native plants. For this reason, the Georgia rockcress is listed as critically endangered and is protected under the Endangered Species Act, and efforts are being made to conserve and protect this rare plant. CRK staff had the opportunity to assist with the conservation efforts at an undisclosed location, helping the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service remove invasive species within its habitat.

"Georgia rockcress is only known to occur in rare habitats, like along the bluffs of the Chattahoochee River, in Alabama and Georgia," says Michele Elmore of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Therefore, the species and the habitats where it occurs represent unique aspects of our natural heritage. Long-term conservation (habitat protection and management) is important to ensure this species and its habitat continue to contribute to the diversity of our ecosystems."

Georgia rockcress is an important part of the ecosystem along the Chattahoochee River, and its conservation is essential for the health and wellbeing of the region. By protecting this species and its habitat, we can help to ensure that it remains a part of the region's natural heritage for future generations.



"Georgia rockcress is only known to occur in rare habitats, like along the bluffs of the Chattahoochee River, in Alabama and Georgia," says Michele Elmore of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Photo credit U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

FAUNA FEATURE : TWO-LINED SALAMANDERS BRIDGE WATER AND LAND



Kennesaw State University researchers capture and tag juvenile two-lined salamanders to study their life histories in South Fork Peachtree Creek in Atlanta.

Turn over a rock in an urban creek in the Georgia Piedmont and you might get lucky to find a two-lined salamander (*Eurycea cirrigera*). Named for their coloring, two-lined salamanders have a yellowish band bordered by two dark brown stripes on their backs. Sometimes mistaken for lizards, salamanders are amphibians and spend part of their lives in the water and on land. The larvae, or babies, have gills and are fully aquatic, living for one-to-three years in the stream under large rocks and in piles of decomposing leaves. As adults, they lose their gills and travel out of the stream, where they spend their lives in wooded forests in burrows. Once a year in late winter, the females return to the stream to lay their eggs.

While there are dozens of salamander species in Georgia, two-lined salamanders are by far the most common in the rocky, urban creeks of metro Atlanta. Still, climate change and development may put the species at risk. Researchers at Kennesaw State University are studying the impact of urbanization on the life histories of two-lined salamanders in South Fork Peachtree Creek in Atlanta.

"Salamanders are an important ecological link between life in the stream and life on land. If we want to protect salamanders in urban areas, we need to protect water quality, stream habitat, and the forested areas around streams," says Leah Rittenburg, a Kennesaw State University graduate student working on the project. The ecology of these and other amazing stream creatures is a great reminder that a metropolitan region like Atlanta, home to millions of people, can still be home to incredible and important biodiversity – if we take care of the forests, streams, and rivers that we share.



Photos by Leah Rittenburg

CELEBRATING 20,000 MORE WATER STEWARDS

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper celebrated the 20,000th visitor on the West Point Lake Floating Classroom (WPLFC) this past September!

Miss Sally’s namesake, Sally Bethea, founding executive director of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, was on hand to celebrate the achievement, along with program donors, local elected officials and governmental representatives, and a group of sixth graders from Callaway Middle School.

Dr. Brian Shumate, Troup County School System Superintendent, shared with the group, “[k]ids can read passages about things, but they have never seen it or done it. They don’t have any reference points like most of us do. They can memorize stuff, but they don’t really learn it. [The Floating

Classroom] provides an experience and background knowledge of all kinds of things: biology, water cycle, life cycle, history, and other things taught out here.”

The impact of the on-the-water field trip experience has been far-reaching in its eight years of operation. The WPLFC has served 577 schools, camps, and groups, and thanks to donor support, has provided 13,166 full scholarships to students attending Title I schools. Combine those numbers with CRK’s original floating classroom on Lake Lanier, still going strong after 20 years, for a total of more than 80,000 students, teachers, and adults served through both programs.



Photo by Erik Voss

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper is grateful to the J.M. Huber Corporation for their unprecedented three-year financial commitment to sponsor 1,600 scholarship trips on board our floating classrooms in 2022, 2023, and 2024.



Interested in joining us for a field trip or private cruise on the lake?

Experience hands-on water testing activities and an up-close view of ospreys, great blue herons, and bald eagles.

Help us reach our next milestone and schedule your outing today!



Lake Lanier Aquatic Learning Center

River Forks Park
Gainesville, GA
Scheduling & scholarship information:
Maranda McGaha, Elachee Nature Science Center
maranda@elachee.org | 770-535-1976

West Point Lake Floating Classroom

Pyne Road Park
LaGrange, GA
Scheduling & scholarship information:
Anna McNamee, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper
amcnamee@chattahoochee.org | 706-416-9241

NEW RECORD FOR ATLANTA’S WESTSIDE RIVER RENDEZVOUS



Warm weather and warm smiles welcomed the 9th Annual Westside River Rendezvous hosted by Chattahoochee Riverkeeper last November. Nearly 100 friends and neighbors of all ages hailing from numerous metro suburbs and neighborhoods gathered at Atlanta’s Westside Reservoir Park to collect water samples from creek locations across the west metro region.

West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) and other community partners provided critical support for the event, making this Rendezvous one of CRK’s most engaging events. Together, participants helped to collect water samples from a record-breaking 58 sites in three west Atlanta creeks: Proctor, Sandy, and Utoy. “Another great event,” remarked Darryl Haddock of WAWA. “This team rocks!”

Upon arrival, attendees were trained on how to safely navigate to their sites and collect

water samples and conduct site observations. The test results and data gathered from these waterways helps CRK prioritize weekly testing through the Neighborhood Water Watch monitoring program. Test results are used by CRK to track and stop pollution sources through on-the-ground, often intensive, targeted field inspections.

The River Rendezvous yielded a deluge of data to sift through. Initial assessments have now been conducted and the data indicate that many sites tested in Proctor, Utoy, and Sandy Creeks met water quality recommendations, pointing to vast improvements to water quality.

CRK has continued monitoring two hot spots identified through the event. Follow-up tests and inspections indicate those locations have since improved, but the cause of the initial spikes is still unknown. In the spring, CRK will host a water forum to discuss these results.

SOLAR FIELD FINED \$500K FOR DIRT VIOLATIONS

This past November, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Department of Justice announced more than a million dollars in penalties against four solar farms across the country for polluting local waterways. Included was a site in Chambers County, Alabama near the headwaters of Oseligee Creek, a tributary to the Chattahoochee River.

CRK first learned of sedimentation problems in Oseligee Creek during a drone flyover of the Chattahoochee River in October 2018. A large plume of sediment was observed flowing into the river just upstream of the City of West Point’s drinking water intake.

CRK staff began investigating the 1,100 acre AL Solar A site and identified numerous and significant violations of the Clean Water Act and the Alabama Water Quality Control Act. We learned that all grading operations on the site were completed in December 2017, and the solar panels became fully operational at that time. Inexplicably, nearly one year later, hundreds of acres remained disturbed and had yet to be stabilized. We also observed tremendous amounts of sediment deposited in receiving streams and many poorly maintained best management practices.

CRK filed a complaint with EPA in November 2018, and since then the agency has worked to investigate and negotiate enforcement actions. “The development of solar energy is a key component of [the Biden] administration’s efforts to combat climate change,” said Larry Starfield, an administrator at the EPA, in a press release on November 14. “These settlements send an important message to the site owners of solar farm projects that these facilities must be planned and built-in compliance with all environmental laws.”

As part of the nationwide decision, EPA announced that a fine of \$500,000 has been imposed on the AL Solar site owner, which is one of the largest fines for erosion control violations ever issued in the state of Alabama.



CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER PROGRAM SIGNALS A CLEANER, MORE RESILIENT FUTURE



National Park Service Superintendent Ann Honious; Jason Ulseth; & Sen. Ossoff toured the river on the CRK Patrol Boat, February 23, 2022.

On December 23, 2022, President Joe Biden signed new legislation creating the Chattahoochee River Program.

Originally introduced by Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in cooperation with then Representative Carolyn Bourdeaux as well as Representatives Henry “Hank” Johnson, Nikema Williams, Lucy McBath, and David Scott, the Program provides new opportunities to improve water quality in the river, which is vital for drinking water supply, the agricultural industry, power generation, and more.

The Program is a small part of a massive piece of federal legislation called the Water Resources Development Act of 2022. The Act authorizes federal spending and management of water projects all over the United States. The United States Army Corps of Engineers will direct the Program, beginning with development of a comprehensive plan for important restoration initiatives.

Federal, state, and other stakeholders like Chattahoochee Riverkeeper will have the chance to provide input on potential projects within the plan. Water resource protection and restoration projects that may be evaluated during the development of the plan could address sediment and erosion, eroding shorelines and riverbanks, ecosystem restoration, water quality, non-point source nutrient pollution, the protection of essential public works, and uses of dredged material.

The Program will receive \$40 million in funding for its projects. Every project will require a cost-share: 75% in federal funds and 25% non-federal.

After decades of legal conflict over the Chattahoochee’s water, collaboration among state, federal, and other stakeholders will be a welcome change.



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Keep up with all of CRK's events and learn more about how to get involved at chattahoochee.org/events.

WATERSHED WINS A Patron Celebration

On October 13, 2022, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper hosted its 28th Annual Patron Celebration at The Stave Room in Atlanta, also broadcasted online for free to audiences at home. Three hundred fifty guests attended the in-person event to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act and Chattahoochee Riverkeeper's many Watershed Wins thanks to the landmark legislation. An hour-long reception allowed guests to mingle and browse silent auction items while enjoying passed hors d'oeuvres and drinks provided by Reformation Brewery, United Distributors, and ASW Distillery.

During the seated dinner program, guests were served a vegan meal while enjoying the annual State of the River Address and a keynote speech by

Jennifer Dorian, President and CEO of WABE Atlanta. Three honorees were recognized: The Georgia Water Coalition received the River Steward Award; Neighborhood Water Watch volunteer Juanita Wallace received the River Hero Award; and Ilene and Ken Kreafler, owners of Reduce, received the River Guardian Award.

Video production company encyclomedia produced a video showcasing all three awardees and Reduce provided wine tumblers for guests to take home. The highlight of the night was the Fund the Future paddle raise led by auctioneer and emcee Dean Crownover; the appeal raised more than \$80,000, a record for the event's night-of fundraising.

Thanks to the generosity of our donors, partners, and attendees, the event raised a total of \$465,000 to sustain Chattahoochee Riverkeeper's programs and ensure more wins throughout our watershed for years to come.

CRK DEEPLY APPRECIATES THE EVENT'S SPONSORS

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