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**Chattahoochee Riverkeeper files suit against City of Atlanta for violating Clean Water Act**

ATLANTA – Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), has filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Atlanta for its ongoing pollution of the Chattahoochee River.

In July, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (CRK) sent a letter notifying city officials that they would have 60 days to stop discharging illegal levels of pollution from the R.M. Clayton Water Reclamation Center or the group would file a lawsuit in federal court for violations of the Clean Water Act. This 60-Day Notice of Intent to Sue is required under the Clean Water Act.

R.M. Clayton is Atlanta’s largest wastewater treatment facility, receiving millions of gallons of the city’s wastewater every day. R.M. Clayton is permitted to release up to 100 million gallons of treated wastewater per day into the Chattahoochee River, but the facility has been illegally discharging pollutants – including chemicals and harmful levels of bacteria – into the river in violation of both its wastewater discharge permit and the Clean Water Act.

In March 2024, CRK detected dangerously elevated levels of E. coli bacteria in the Chattahoochee River and traced the source to the R.M. Clayton facility’s outfall where wastewater is released into the river. Daily testing conducted by CRK at the outfall found E. coli levels were on average 340 times higher than the amount recommended by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for safe water recreation.

CRK notified the City of Atlanta and Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) that the facility was discharging large amounts of E. coli and other pollutants into the river, threatening public health, wildlife, and the river’s ecosystem.

After news spread of unsafe conditions in the river, the City of Atlanta initially attributed the facility’s failure to both heavy rainfall and multiple discharges of illicit substances; however, an inspection conducted by Georgia EPD revealed a state of disrepair at the facility, with problems at all stages of wastewater treatment and numerous safety hazards.

Ongoing monitoring by CRK at the facility’s outfall has revealed sporadic spikes in E. coli, which can cause serious illness, especially in young children, the elderly, and the immunocompromised. CRK also found high levels of organic material, phosphorus, and

ammonia in the facility's discharge, which contribute to low dissolved oxygen levels in the river, causing stress to fish and other aquatic life.

In a complaint filed in federal court on September 6, CRK notes that the city's failure to adequately maintain and operate the R.M. Clayton facility has resulted in illegal discharges of pollutants into the Chattahoochee River for more than a year. Between July 2023 and July 2024, the facility violated its permit limitations at least 79 times.

"The City of Atlanta knows that the R.M. Clayton facility is failing and poses a serious threat to the health of the Chattahoochee River and all the people and wildlife who depend on it," says Jason Ulseth, CRK's Riverkeeper and executive director. "Yet the city has allowed operational and maintenance failures at the facility to compound over time, failing to follow through on even the most basic equipment repairs."

"For months, the city has failed to alleviate very real public health and environmental concerns at the R.M. Clayton facility," says Hutton Brown, senior attorney in SELC's Georgia office. "Because Atlanta's leadership did not step up and show they're serious about fixing this problem, we had no choice but to step in and ask the court to hold them accountable."

In response to the city's lack of transparency and failure to address ongoing, repeated violations at the R.M. Clayton facility, CRK filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Atlanta on September 6. Pursuant to the Clean Water Act, CRK will seek an injunction to prohibit the ongoing violations of the city's wastewater permit, as well as civil penalties, attorney's fees and costs.

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**About Chattahoochee Riverkeeper:**

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper's mission is to educate, advocate, and secure the protection and stewardship of the Chattahoochee River, including its lakes, tributaries, and watershed, in order to restore and conserve their ecological health for the people and wildlife that depend on the river system and in recognition of the important ecosystem functions provided throughout the region and planet. For more information, visit [www.chattahoochee.org](http://www.chattahoochee.org).

**About Southern Environmental Law Center:**

The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation's most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities to protect our region's air, water, climate, wildlife, lands, and people. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the

organization has a staff of 200, including more than 120 legal and policy experts, and is headquartered in Charlottesville, Va., with offices in Asheville, Atlanta, Birmingham, Chapel Hill, Charleston, Nashville, Richmond, and Washington, D.C. [southernenvironment.org](http://southernenvironment.org)