



RIVERCHAT

Summer/Fall 2024

A publication of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (CRK)

CRK FILES FEDERAL LAWSUIT AGAINST ATLANTA

The resilience of the Chattahoochee River is facing a critical test this year. In Atlanta, the city's largest wastewater treatment plant is violating clean water laws by discharging improperly treated wastewater into the river. Chattahoochee Riverkeeper sounded the alarm because no one else stepped up – not the City of Atlanta, the state of Georgia, nor any other environmental agency. Now, we've filed a federal lawsuit against Atlanta to hold them accountable for their pollution and force them to clean up their act.

**30
YEARS**

BY THE NUMBERS

P. 4

**HOLDING
WASTEWATER
TREATMENT
PLANTS
ACCOUNTABLE**

P. 8

**FOUNDING
RIVERKEEPER
SALLY BETHEA'S
LABOR OF LOVE**
P. 10

In Atlanta, foamy discharge from the R.M. Clayton wastewater treatment facility enters the Chattahoochee River south of the Atlanta Road bridge.

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Our mission is to advocate and secure the protection and stewardship of the Chattahoochee River, its lakes, tributaries, and watershed.

METRO ATLANTA OFFICE: 6020 River View Road SE, Suite 100, Smyrna, GA 30126

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MIDDLE CHATTAHOOCHEE OFFICE: 300 Kingfisher Lane, LaGrange, GA 30240

404-352-9828

WWW.CHATTAHOOCHEE.ORG

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REFLECTIONS: TAKING PRIDE IN OUR PROGRESS

For 430 miles from the headwaters in North Georgia to the Alabama and Florida borders, the Chattahoochee River never takes a break, always working hard to meet our needs. The river provides drinking water to more than five million people and supports vital industries, but for decades an unchecked flow of pollution threatened public health and many parts of the river ecosystem.

The main source of pollution stemmed from the City of Atlanta's failure to invest in essential upgrades to its sewer system, causing thousands of overflows and spills of raw sewage mixed with rainwater into our waterways each year. In 1994, concerned community members founded Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and set out to hold the city accountable for its negligence. Following CRK's landmark Clean Water Act lawsuit, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) enforced a plan to overhaul Atlanta's entire sewer system.

30 years later, our work hasn't slowed down. We are once again suing the City of Atlanta for violating the Clean Water Act by polluting the Chattahoochee River. Recent wastewater treatment system failures identified by CRK in Atlanta and Phenix City, Alabama, have reinforced the critical need for our watchdog monitoring and investment in our infrastructure. *Read more on pages 8-9.*



Though challenges persist, we can take great pride in the progress we have made since CRK was founded. The river has become an asset to communities in Atlanta and downstream, where planning is in the works for a network of parks, walking and paddling trails that will bring people to the river. The creeks and streams in our watershed are cleaner than they have been in decades. And we have built lasting relationships with stakeholders throughout the region to prioritize the protection and preservation of the Chattahoochee River today, for the next 30 years, and beyond. With your support, we're working to ensure the river and its lakes and tributaries will be clean for generations to come.


JASON ULSETH
Riverkeeper & Executive Director

FACES OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE: JOHN MCCALPIN



Whether he's fishing for crappie or manning CRK's Floating Classroom, Captain John McCalpin is a fixture on Lake Lanier! After retiring from his managerial role at a global consulting company, Captain John sought to stay active and make a meaningful impact. Since joining CRK in 2022, he has spearheaded significant enhancements to our boathouse and vessels on Lake Lanier and has standardized procedures for our boat fleet. "I'm having a blast working with the folks from CRK and gaining knowledge of the watershed's incredibly complex and fragile ecosystems," says Captain John. His contributions to CRK are deeply valued and appreciated.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER



Broken sewer line resolved

Rottenwood Creek is rotten no more after CRK field teams identified the culprit of a major bacteria spike just two miles from the entrance of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area. CRK teams tracked down and confirmed the source with a series of expeditions and tests which revealed a broken subterranean sewage line expelling visible plumes from below the creek bed. After repairs, indicator bacteria dropped by more than 100 times and is now averaging within the safe water standard. Great work from our unstoppable volunteer and tracking teams, and quick corrective action from Cobb County Water System! See our data at chattahoochee.org/nww.

Massive illegal tire dump stopped



While scouting a cleanup site at RiverLands Gateway, CRK and Trust for Public Land discovered a large number of illegally dumped tires. Somebody had been dropping tires down a steep embankment into a wetland area behind a nearby business, where they remained unseen. We contacted the business to alert them of the issue.

From January through May, the offenders dumped tires on numerous occasions, resulting in an excess of 1,700 tires. We advised the business to get video surveillance and to file a police report. The offenders were subsequently apprehended, and the tires have since been removed.

Wave of new and renewed permits in the headwaters.

Commenting on permits is an important part of CRK's work to stay on top of pollution sources and achieve improvements to waste discharges in our watershed. This year, CRK commented on proposed permits in the Chattahoochee headwaters region including: the first new public wastewater treatment discharge since Lake Lanier has been listed as impaired (Lumpkin Co.); two new land application sites (White and Lumpkin Co.); and permit renewals for a municipal wastewater discharge (White Co.) and an industrial discharge (Habersham Co.). Our comments prompted the modification of some permits to include testing for additional nutrients and more frequent monitoring.

Construction site pollution in the Middle Chattahoochee

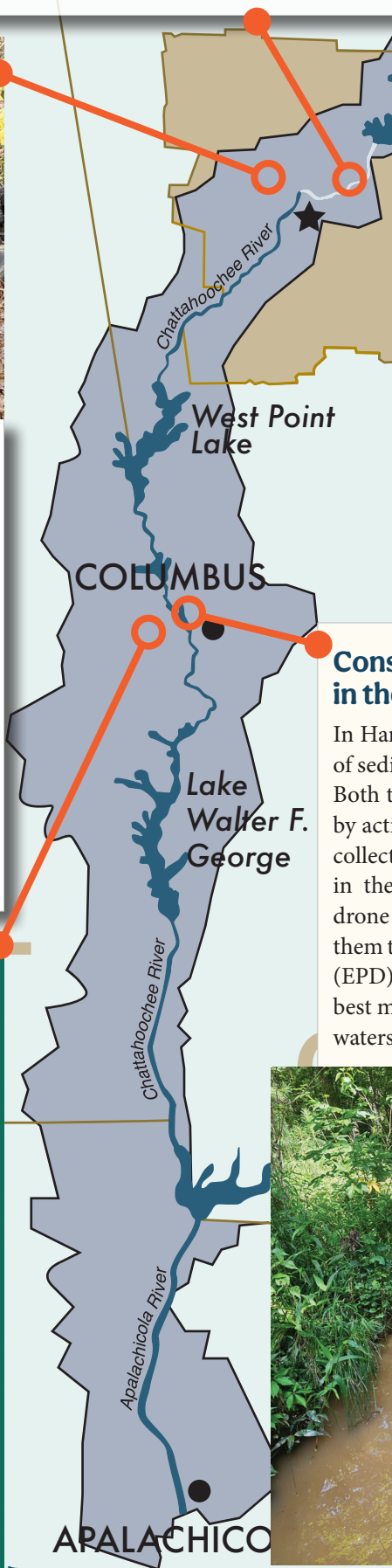


In Harris County, Georgia, CRK responded to a report of sediment entering a tributary of Standing Boy Creek. Both the creek and a pond downstream were muddied by active construction upstream, and turbidity samples collected by CRK staff confirmed high levels of sediment in the water downstream of the site. CRK captured drone imagery of suspected site violations and reported them to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD). A site inspection performed by EPD found failed best management practices and sediment entering state waters, and EPD mandated corrective action.

COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOWS IN COLUMBUS

During heavy rainfall in Columbus, Georgia, the city's combined sewer system can overflow and discharge both stormwater and sewage into the Chattahoochee River. Bacteria from these overflows pose a significant health concern to people, pets, and wildlife along this heavily recreated stretch of the river.

In 2020, EPD issued a revised combined sewer permit to Columbus Water Works (CWW) with stronger bacterial limits. When CWW challenged these changes in court, CRK intervened to defend the permit alongside EPD. An Administrative Law Judge heard the case in the spring, and we anticipate final arguments and a decision by the court later this year.



of Mexico




30 YEARS BY THE NUMBERS

WATER MONITORING

228 Neighborhood Water Watch (NWW) sites tested weekly

46,000+ NWW samples collected and tested

TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE

3,000,000+ Pounds of trash and recyclables removed by volunteers

14 In-stream trash traps throughout the watershed

20,000+ Cleanup volunteers

EDUCATION

100,000+ Students and teachers on board the floating classroom

500+

Participants in Water Warriors educational, paddle, and fly fishing events

ADVOCACY

1,600+

Industrial site investigations in Georgia and Alabama



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FOR HELPING US KEEP WATCH OVER OUR WATERS! Donors January through June 2024

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In honor of Karin Van Vlack
 Jennifer Todd

In honor of Don Young
 J.M. Huber Corporation

GIFTS IN-KIND

American Rivers
 Appalachian Outfitters
 Atlanta Journal Constitution
 Atlas Pizza
 Audacy
 Jess Ballew
 Best Friends on the Lake
 Pooch Pontoon
 Chattahoochee River
 National Recreation Area
 Cool River Tubing Company
 Cox Enterprises - Cox
 Conserves
 Kristin Davis
 Dear Elouise Fine Paper
 DeKalb County Sanitation
 Division
 Beckie Dominick
 Robert Eidson
 Elachee Nature Science
 Center
 Elohee Retreat Center

Encyclomedia
 Festive Water
 Find Your Center Yoga
 Fish Hawk
 Gainesville Parks and
 Recreation Foundation
 Georgia Nature
 Photographers Association
 The Georgia Water and
 Wastewater Institute
 Habersham Mills
 Hall County
 Hall County Parks and
 Recreation
 Harvest Moon Plants
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 Holland Portraits
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Show your commitment to a cleaner, healthier
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To join or renew your membership, visit
chattahoochee.org/become-a-member



HOLDING WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANTS ACCOUNTABLE

CLEAN WATER ACT LITIGATION

In 1995, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper filed a lawsuit against the City of Atlanta for its chronic violations of the Clean Water Act associated with its sewer system. Backed by a coalition of downstream municipalities, associations, and property owners, CRK won the case in 1997 and forced Atlanta to overhaul its failing wastewater infrastructure. As a result, water quality in the Chattahoochee River drastically improved for metro Atlanta and communities downstream.

30 years later, monitoring by CRK has found that the City of Atlanta is polluting the Chattahoochee River once again. The city has failed to adequately maintain and operate R.M. Clayton, its largest wastewater treatment facility, sending millions of gallons of improperly treated sewage directly into the Chattahoochee River. In September, CRK and its representation at the Southern Environmental Law Center filed a new lawsuit against Atlanta to hold the city accountable and stop the ongoing illegal discharges of pollutants into the river.

The same month, CRK also filed a federal lawsuit against Phenix City, Alabama, for water quality violations stemming from its wastewater treatment facility. It is clear that municipalities remain significant sources of pollution within the Chattahoochee River watershed, and CRK is committed to holding them accountable.



FULTON COUNTY BIG CREEK WATER RECLAMATION FACILITY

In the summer of 2023, CRK and National Park Service (NPS) staff detected very high levels of E. coli bacteria in the river within the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA) and tracked the source to Fulton County's Big Creek Water Reclamation Facility. CRK alerted officials and news media. For the first time in its history, NPS shut down public access to the river for 15 miles downstream of the plant.

For weeks, CRK and CRNRA staff continued emergency daily sampling along the river. After a three-week closure through the Fourth of July holiday, CRK and NPS testing showed a reduction in E. coli levels and NPS reopened access to the river.

In March of 2024, after months of negotiations, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) released a proposed enforcement order for the 2023 Big Creek malfunction, including a paltry penalty of \$20,000 for the river closure (\$1,000 per day of closure) and no requirement for additional river monitoring. As a result of CRK's advocacy, more than 90 members of the public commented on the draft enforcement order.

Read more at chattahoochee.org/rm-clayton

CITY OF ATLANTA R.M. CLAYTON WATER RECLAMATION CENTER

In March of 2024, CRK tracked very high E. coli levels in the Chattahoochee River to the City of Atlanta's R.M. Clayton Water Reclamation Center (WRC) and notified the City of Atlanta and EPD. CRK alerted news media and advised recreators to exercise caution for 60 miles downstream of the plant.

CRK continued monitoring R.M. Clayton WRC's outfall into the Chattahoochee throughout the spring and summer. Testing results showed spikes in bacteria levels as high as 10 times the amount recommended for safe water recreation, indicating persistent operational issues at the facility.

High levels of organic material and nutrients in the facility's discharge have also contributed to low oxygen levels in the river, which fish and other aquatic life need to survive.

In September of 2024, CRK filed a federal lawsuit against the City of Atlanta for the ongoing violations of the Clean Water Act at R.M. Clayton WRC. We are committed to holding the city accountable for its pollution of the river.



ACCOUNTABLE ACROSS THE WATERSHED

PHENIX CITY WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT

In November of 2023, after routine reports showed that the Phenix City Wastewater Treatment Plant was exceeding its permit limits, CRK began receiving reports of discoloration, odor, and foam at the plant's outfall into the Chattahoochee River and we increased the frequency of our monitoring at the outfall.

In March of 2024, CRK met with Phenix City to learn more about the causes of the plant's permit violations. Phenix City officials reported that they were working on a series of plant upgrades, but funding to fully complete repairs remained a challenge.

CRK has continued sampling at the Phenix City plant's outfall, detecting sporadic spikes in E. coli bacteria, nutrients, and organic material. In September, CRK filed a federal Clean Water Act lawsuit against Phenix City for its polluting of the Chattahoochee River and threatening water quality downstream.

Read more at chattahoochee.org/phenix-city



WHAT IS E. COLI?

E. coli is a type of bacteria that lives in the intestines of people and warm-blooded animals. It is an indicator organism used to identify fecal contamination in freshwater. People who contact waters with elevated E. coli levels are at increased risk of developing skin rashes or gastrointestinal illness. CRK monitors more than 200 sites along the river and its tributaries for E. coli and other water quality parameters through our Neighborhood Water Watch and BacteriALERT programs.



An aerial drone photo shows impaired secondary clarifiers at R.M. Clayton WRC.





“My book, *Keeping the Chattahoochee*, was a labor of love: an opportunity to tell stories of the extraordinary people who helped us restore and defend the river, as well as those who tried to stand in our way. These tales are woven together with nature journaling from a year of walks along the Chattahoochee, as I contemplated the beauty and wonder of our natural world.” – Sally Sierer Bethea, *Chattahoochee Riverkeeper* from 1994-2014

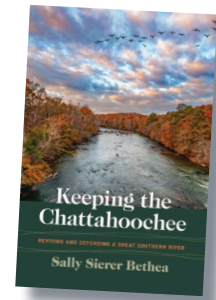
WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO SAVE AN ENDANGERED RIVER?

During her twenty years as CRK’s founding director and Riverkeeper, Sally Sierer Bethea worked tirelessly to hold polluters accountable and defend the Chattahoochee River. She boldly led efforts to revive the river from a century of misuse, ensuring it would survive – and thrive – for years to come.

Though retired from CRK, Bethea continues her work as a vocal advocate for environmental stewardship. In 2023 she published her first book, *Keeping the Chattahoochee*, in which she recounts inspiring, frustrating, and funny stories that demonstrate what it takes to fight for clean and healthy waterways.

As we celebrate 30 years of keeping watch over the Chattahoochee, Bethea’s story has made its way to the big screen. In a new documentary film, *Saving the Chattahoochee*, director Hal Jacobs takes a more personal look at Bethea’s life and work as Riverkeeper and explores the ways in which she and other women stepped up to protect our rivers, lakes, and streams. Visit bit.ly/savingchattahoochee to learn more about the film.

Purchase a copy of *Keeping the Chattahoochee* through the University of Georgia Press at bit.ly/keepingchattahoochee.



The Georgia Center for the Book included *Keeping the Chattahoochee* on its list of books all Georgians and young Georgians should read in 2024.

FUNDING OUR WATER INFRASTRUCTURE AMID GROWTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

If Atlantans were not thinking about their source of drinking water before this summer’s water crisis, they are now. The failure of multiple water pipes in the city was a harsh reminder that water infrastructure affects our everyday lives.

And it’s not just the drinking water that comes into our homes — the wastewater that goes down the drain and into the sewer system also needs attention.

Relatedly, the effects of climate change — like the “rain bomb” that generated flooding on Atlanta’s Westside in the fall of 2023 — pose a real threat to the city’s stormwater infrastructure.

How does the City of Atlanta pay for the drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure necessary for a growing population, economic expansion, and dramatic shifts in rainfall and temperature?

Customers, residents, and visitors to the city are the primary revenue

sources. Customers pay water and sewer bills. And anyone who lives in or visits the city pays a penny-tax on consumer purchases, also known as a Municipal Local Option Sales Tax, which has reportedly generated \$1.8 billion in revenue specifically for water infrastructure since 2004.

The other major source of revenue: federal dollars. Aside from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock and Congresswoman Nikema Williams have introduced legislation to fund water projects in Chattahoochee River Basin cities: Atlanta, East Point, College Park, and Columbus.

To meet our water demands, we really need a “water tax” like the existing “gas tax” that generates revenue for transportation projects. A statewide water tax would invest in a water infrastructure trust fund to benefit Atlanta and communities across Georgia.



A FAMILIAR SIGHT on the Hooch!

Riverkeeper Jason Ulseth navigates CRK's custom-built patrol boat down the river, joined by Board members Jamie Pryor, Gerard Gunthert, and staff member Candace Baumann. CRK routinely patrols and tests water quality throughout the entire Chattahoochee River Basin.



CLASS IS IN SESSION aboard the Miss Sally and Chota Princess II!

Over the years, these vessels have welcomed more than 100,000 students to participate in the Floating Classroom program on West Point Lake and Lake Lanier. Thanks to the support of our generous partners, students get to experience hands-on STEM activities while learning about their source of drinking water up close.



THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS!

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WHAT WOULD

Atlanta, Georgia, and the Chattahoochee River Basin be like without CRK's leadership?

In a perfect world, the federal, state, and city governments would be on watch and protecting our natural resources, but it just doesn't work that way. The Chattahoochee River needs a defender. CRK – a community-powered organization – has embraced this role and the list of accomplishments over the past 30 years is prolific and historic.

- Dave Kirkpatrick, Co-Chair,
CRK Board of Directors



WE ALL HAVE A HAND in making sure our river is safe and healthy.

Our movement to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River watershed is 10,000 members strong. We're trash collectors, canoe paddlers, water samplers, fly anglers, activists and more who share a common goal: ensuring our river flows with enough clean water to sustain communities now and for generations to come.

Your support sustains vital water protection programs like trash removal, water quality monitoring, and environmental advocacy, as well as our Floating Classroom and Water Warriors education programs. Membership also connects you to a community of like-minded people who make clean water a priority.



JOIN OUR MOVEMENT:
become a member today.

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SAVE THE DATE

MEMBER CELEBRATION

November 3, 2024 | Atlanta, GA

SWEEP THE HOOCH

March 22, 2025 | Watershed-wide

Keep up with all of CRK's events at chattahoochee.org/events.

SWEEP THE HOOCH

This spring Chattahoochee Riverkeeper hosted our 14th annual Sweep the Hooch, a watershed-wide cleanup.

More than 1,200 volunteers helped to remove 32.5 tons of trash from the Chattahoochee River and its lakes and tributaries. We're grateful to all the event's participants and sponsors for putting us one step closer to our vision of a trash-free Chattahoochee.

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WaterFEST

Superb melodies, big smiles, and delightful weather – the second annual Waterfest was truly memorable!

A heartfelt thank you to the nearly 1,200 attendees who joined us at Midland Greenway in Gainesville to revel in the festivities, as well as to the gifted artists and musicians, guest exhibitors, and our amazing team of volunteers and sponsors who made the event extraordinary!

PRESENTING PARTNER



RIVER ADVOCATE



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