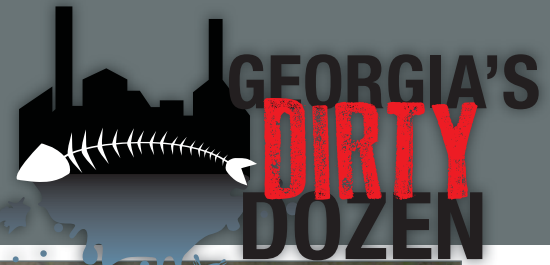


2011's worst offenses against Georgia's Water



#1 Brier Creek and Commissioner Creek: 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.

The Water Bodies:

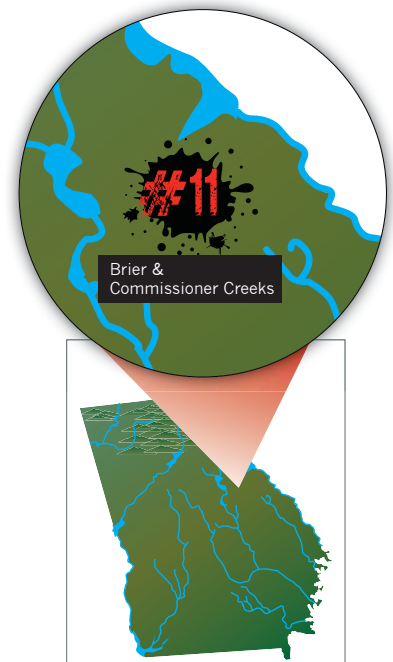
Brier Creek is a 123-mile-long blackwater tributary of the Savannah River. It rises in Warren County southwest of Augusta and flows southeast to the Savannah River near Sylvania. The City of Waynesboro draws its drinking water from the creek. Commissioner Creek rises in Jones County west of Milledgeville and flows east through Wilkinson County to empty into the Oconee River. These streams flow through extensive riparian wetlands.

The Dirt:

When 10,000 fish die on our streams, EPD should be able to identify the cause and take action to correct it. Unfortunately, the monitoring required in EPD permits for kaolin processing facilities and mines may not be adequate for the state agency to determine whether or not the industry is at fault for these fish kills.

More than a month after the fish kill on Commissioner Creek began, and after an EPD investigation on the creek and at numerous kaolin facilities, it appears a specific cause of the tragedy may never be determined.

The more recent incident on Brier Creek which forced the city of Waynesboro to cease pumping its municipal water supply from the creek is still under





investigation. Four weeks after the incident, Waynesboro is still finding high levels of aluminum sulfate in water pumped from the creek.

Some eight million metric tons of kaolin are mined in the state each year with a value of \$1 billion—and it's all found at the edge of the fall line in middle Georgia, stretching along a line from Macon to Augusta and impacting three major river basins—the Flint, Ocmulgee, Oconee and Savannah. Within this narrow kaolin belt, EPD is charged with regulating some 140 kaolin mines and eight kaolin processing plants that discharge wastewater to streams. Each facility must obtain EPD permits detailing management and water monitoring practices designed to keep pollution out of nearby streams.

During EPD's investigations on Commissioner Creek, the agency learned that the monitoring data that kaolin processors are required to record may not be sufficient to characterize what is discharged to area creeks, thus making it impossible to determine whether the facilities are at fault.

The mining process itself, however, can also contribute to pollution. Kaolin mines strip vegetation leaving large areas of exposed soil that can be washed to nearby streams during rain events. When this dirt enters streams it can cover creek beds, disrupting fish spawning and killing fish food sources. Naturally occurring heavy metals such as arsenic, barium, chromium, lead, nickel and iron are also released into the environment during the mining process. Currently, these mines are not required to monitor for these heavy metals.

Meanwhile, continued funding cuts and staffing shortages at EPD make it difficult for the agency to fully investigate such incidents or notify the public of potentially dangerous situations. For instance, on Brier Creek, EPD never notified the City of Waynesboro about the problem.

What Must Be Done:

To prevent or determine the cause of tragedies like these, EPD needs all the information it can obtain—not just from stream monitoring, but also from the businesses and industries that discharge wastewater to those streams.

EPD should evaluate the monitoring information required from kaolin mines and processing facilities and consider strengthening monitoring requirements, including toxicity sampling at discharges and mine sites. Inspections of kaolin facilities should also be increased.



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