

2011's worst offenses against Georgia's Water



#2 Altamaha River: Rayonier Pulp Mill Discharge Destroys Fisheries

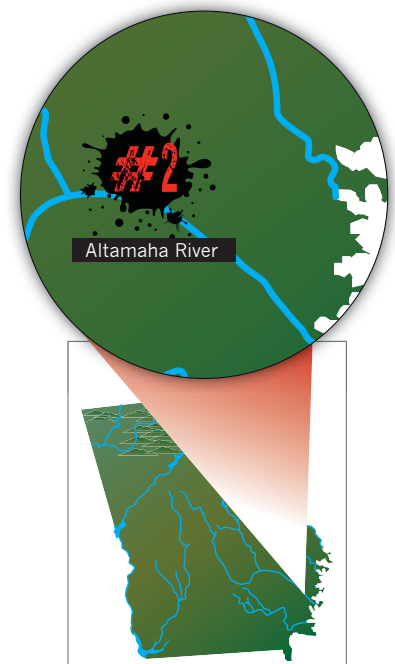
For over a half century Rayonier's Jesup pulp mill has discharged noxious waste into the state's largest river, the Altamaha, that fouls the river for miles, completely altering its character by turning the water black and pulpy and emitting a rancid odor. Fisheries, including the river's once prosperous 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, Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) and Rayonier have failed to restore Georgia's "Little Amazon," and recent actions suggest that eliminating the mess appears to have taken a back seat to expanding the company's product line and profits.

The River:

The Altamaha is Georgia's largest river and the third largest contributor of freshwater to the Atlantic Ocean on North America's eastern shore. It drains a 14,000-square mile basin stretching from north of Atlanta to Darien and is a place of unsurpassed beauty. Often called "Georgia's Little Amazon," The Nature Conservancy named it to its list of the 75 last great places on Earth. Formed by the confluence of the Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers, the Altamaha system provides drinking water for communities from Atlanta to Middle Georgia. The Altamaha itself fuels two major industrial complexes—a nuclear power plant near Baxley and Rayonier's pulp mill near Jesup where the makings of flatscreen TVs, air & oil filters and disposable diapers are produced. Its freshwater flow also supports commercial shrimp and crab harvests on the Georgia coast.

The Dirt:

Rayonier has operated a pulp mill on the Altamaha at Jesup since the mid-1950s; the consequences for the Altamaha have been immeasurable. A once-thriving commercial shad fishery has been greatly diminished. Anglers say fish caught from the river are not edible because they reek of the mill. And, biologists suspect that the mill is responsible for making a long stretch of the





river un-inhabitable for mussels, creatures that when found in abundance actually help keep rivers clean.

Rayonier's blackwater discharge discolors the river, staining white sandbars brown and carrying the mill's noxious fumes downstream. Their 50 million gallon a day wastewater discharge completely changes the character of the river for some 50 miles to the Altamaha Delta.

In 2008, EPD and Rayonier entered into an agreement to fix this long-running pollution problem by reducing the color of the discharge (currently coffee black) by 50 percent over a period of 10 years. Local citizens and the Altamaha Riverkeeper petitioned EPD to strengthen the agreement, but their requests were denied. Three years later, the pollution continues with no apparent improvements.

Earlier this year, Rayonier sought and received permission from EPD to revise the timetable for cleaning up its mess in order to convert one of its production lines to a more profitable (and more polluting) process.

Though the wastewater treatment process for this new production line is unproven, and similar to processes that have failed elsewhere, EPD agreed to the changes.

Rayonier reported net income of \$217 million in 2010, yet improvements at its Jesup facility remain slow in coming.

Experts say that similar facilities throughout the world are able to operate facilities like this with virtually clear effluent, and yet Rayonier is allowed to discharge effluent using decades old technology.

Inexplicably, EPD lists the section of the river below Rayonier as "Supporting Designated Use" for fishing on its 2010 evaluation of stream health in Georgia.

What Must Be Done:

EPD must require Rayonier to invest in technology and infrastructure to improve its wastewater treatment to fully protect and restore the Altamaha and shorten the time frame for eliminating its polluting discharge.



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