



Georgia PIRG

CITIZEN AGENDA

A Report To Members Of The Georgia Public Interest Research Group

Defend Georgia's Waters

Polluter Fees Bill Introduced

This fall, Georgia PIRG staff garnered support for legislation from more than a dozen legislators that would charge fees to companies that pollute Georgia's water. These fees would help cover the cost of dealing with the pollution they create and pay for more staff to enforce the state's clean water laws.

More than 3,000 miles of rivers and streams and 56,000 acres of lakes are too polluted for fishing or swimming in Georgia. A number of these waterways do not meet clean water standards because polluters are discharging more pollution than their permits allow.

Often polluters are not fined for violations because the Georgia Environmental Protection Division does not have the resources to enforce the law. Georgia PIRG's research shows that from April 2002 to March 2004, the EPD did not fine 79 of 125 facilities found in violation of their discharge permits.

"Georgia is home to too many waterways that we cannot enjoy for recreation because of polluters discharging into our waterways," said Georgia PIRG Clean Water Associate Megan Fitzgerald. "We need more environmental cops on the beat to make our waters swimmable and fishable again."

During last year's legislative session, Georgia PIRG helped introduce a bill to establish polluter fees, but it was introduced too late in the

session to pass out of committee. Already this year, Georgia PIRG has secured strong bipartisan support for polluter fees from Reps. Wendell Willard (R-Atlanta) and Debbie Buckner (D-Columbus).

"Georgia PIRG is making it a priority during the legislative session to see that taxpayers get off the hook by making polluters pay," said Fitzgerald. ■

Save Our Wild Forests

Thousands of Georgians Oppose Bush Forests Plan

More than 30,000 Georgians submitted comments to the Bush administration opposing a plan that would open roadless areas of our national forests to logging, road building and other environmentally harmful activities. The changes would affect more than 63,000 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia.

"We must protect the Chattahoochee forest so it continues to provide clean drinking water, wildlife habitat and recreational sites," said Jill Johnson, Georgia PIRG advocate.

The Roadless Rule was enacted in January 2001 to protect 58.5 million



Staff Photo

MAKING POLLUTERS PAY—Megan Fitzgerald, Georgia PIRG Clean Water Associate, describes how polluter fees will lead to better enforcement of clean water laws with state Rep. Debbie Buckner (Columbus).



Member Resource

✓ CLEAN WATER
Log onto www.georgiapirg.org and click on "Defend Georgia's Waters" to learn more about the need to charge polluter fees to deal with the pollution they discharge into our waterways.

acres of national forests from road building, logging, mining and other extractive uses.

However, in an effort to open up our last remaining wild forests to extractive industry, the Bush administration in July 2004 announced a proposal to repeal the Roadless Rule, and put the decision of roadless area protection into the hands of individual governors.

Governors from Tenn., N.C. and Va. have already publicly opposed the changes. A spokesman for Gov. Sonny Perdue has said that Perdue will study the proposal to determine what approach to take. ■

■ Clean Water Program

DNR Board Votes to Weaken Stream Protections

On Dec. 7, Georgia's Board of Natural Resources moved to weaken protections for streams across the state. Our waterways, especially



Tara K. Munz, University of Georgia

PROTECTING STREAM BUFFERS—A buffer zone of vegetation helps protect a segment of Factory Creek, a tributary of the Chattahoochee River, from sediments and fertilizer as it flows through a farm near Blakely, Georgia.

those in metropolitan Atlanta, are being polluted with sediment and other types of run-off pollution from overdevelopment.

A Successful History

State law had required 25-foot stream buffers on all state waters, usually made up of plants and other vegetation. These buffers provide a last line of defense against run-off pollution by trapping pollutants like oil, sediment, fertilizer and pesticides before they reach our waterways.

Buffers also slow stream flow so that downstream residents are protected from erosion and flood conditions, and provide habitat for wildlife around streams and shade that controls water temperatures.

For several years, developers have been pushing for rule changes that would allow them to pipe and pave

over small streams and streams that do not have water flowing in them year-round, rather than accommodating these waterways in their projects. For downstream residents in Atlanta and farther south, the rule changes could mean flooded properties, muddy swimming holes and unsafe pollution levels.

Developers Change The Rules

During last year's legislative session, Georgia PIRG and the Georgia Water Coalition stopped a proposal from developers that that would have allowed the headwaters of many of Georgia's major rivers to be piped or paved over.

Unsatisfied, developers pushed this fall to remove buffer protections from some of Georgia's smallest streams. And, on Dec. 7, they got their wish when the Board of Natural Resources voted 11-5 to revoke buffer protections from streams fed only by rainwater.

Megan Fitzgerald, Clean Water Associate with Georgia PIRG, joined more than 25 fishermen, environmental advocates, engineers and homeowners in speaking out

against the proposed rule at the board meeting.

The Public Responds

More than 700 Georgians submitted public comments electronically, letting the Board of Natural Resources know they opposed the proposed changes after being alerted by Georgia PIRG.

"Last year, after public outcry from throughout the state, the Legislature rejected a similar proposal. Now, hundreds of citizens have voiced their opposition to the plan, urging the Board not to exempt these streams from buffer protections," Fitzgerald told the Board of Natural Resources.

"The board has no direction from the Legislature to exempt these streams from protections and should listen to the citizens opposing this rule," she concluded.

Board members Ms. Sally Bethea, Mr. Ralph Callaway, Mr. Jim Butler, Mr. Reese Thompson and Ms. Sara Clark listened to the public outcry and voted against removing the protections. ■

Member Action

✓ STREAMS
Log onto www.georgiapirg.org and send an e-mail thanking the DNR Board members who voted against weakening stream buffer protections.



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News Briefs

Atlantans "Paying The Price" For Rx Drugs

Uninsured consumers in Atlanta pay 77 percent more for prescription drugs than the best available market prices, according to a survey released in October by Georgia PIRG.

Georgia PIRG surveyed more than 40 pharmacies in metro Atlanta to determine how much more uninsured consumers pay for 12 commonly prescribed medications than the federal government, which receives the best market price.

"When 45 million uninsured Americans go it alone at the drug store, they pay the price—often twice as much as the federal government pays when it buys the same drugs," said Jill Johnson, Georgia PIRG advocate.

The key findings of the report include that uninsured Atlantans pay 81 percent more for Zithromax—the most commonly dispensed antibiotic in America—than the federal government pays. Georgia PIRG is urging state policymakers to enact policies such as expanding prescription drug buying pools and restricting drug company marketing to doctors.

"It's time to fight back against the drug companies and lower

the price of prescription drugs," concluded Johnson. "Otherwise, Atlantans will continue to pay the price." ■

Annual Toy Safety Report Released

Hazardous toys continue to be sold in stores across the country, according to a nationwide survey released on Nov. 23 by Georgia PIRG.

In 2003, more than 200,000 people sought treatment in hospital emergency rooms for toy-related injuries; more than a third of those injured were under the age of five. Eleven children under the age of 15 died from toy related injuries.

"Even one toy-related death is too many, because these deaths are preventable," said Jill Johnson, Georgia PIRG advocate.

The annual "Trouble in Toyland" report offers guidelines for purchasing toys for small children and provides examples of toys currently on store shelves that pose potential safety hazards. Georgia PIRG's research focused on four categories: toys that pose choking and strangulation hazards, toys that contain toxic chemicals and dangerously loud toys.

Georgia PIRG's toy safety reports have led to more than 120 Con-



TROUBLE IN TOYLAND—Georgia PIRG Advocate Jill Johnson demonstrates the strangulation hazards posed by water yo-yo balls at a toy safety press conference at Children's Health Care of Atlanta.

sumer Product Safety Commission recalls and other enforcement actions. The full report can be found online at www.toysafety.net. ■

Georgia PIRG, Coalition Urge Ethics Reforms

In keeping with one of Georgia PIRG's main principles—that the public has a right to a political system that is more open and accountable to average Georgians than it is to wealthy and corporate interests—Georgia PIRG is supporting Gov. Perdue's efforts to enact meaningful ethics reform. These reforms would prevent special interests from exercising undue influence over elected decisionmakers and ensure governmental decisions are fully open to public scrutiny.

"If Georgia is to adopt strong, comprehensive ethics reforms, it is time to move from discussion to decision, and from sound bites to signed legislation," said Jill Johnson, advocate with Georgia PIRG.

Georgia PIRG is working with Common Cause, AARP of Georgia, League of Women Voters of Georgia and others to build support for Gov. Perdue's ethics package and ensure that meaningful ethics reform is passed in this legislative session. Georgia PIRG supports giving the State Ethics Commission the power to preside over conflict of interest matters, increase penalties for violations and strengthen whistleblower protections. ■

Georgia PIRG Citizen Agenda is published three times a year in June, October and January by Georgia Public Interest Research Group. Members contributing \$25 or more receive Georgia PIRG Citizen Agenda. \$1.25 of your contribution pays for the newsletter; the rest goes to public interest research, advocacy and other expenses. For information on membership, contact Georgia PIRG, 1447 Peachtree Street, Suite 304, Atlanta, GA 30309, or e-mail info@georgiapirg.org. Information about Georgia PIRG is also available on the Web at www.georgiapirg.org.



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Georgia PIRG

■ The Last Word

Holding Our Leaders Accountable



Peter Curtis

Jill Johnson

As this newsletter arrives at your door, the Georgia Legislature is meeting to address some of the state's serious problems. Rising health care costs, ethics reform and poor educational testing scores are but a few of the challenges our officials will attempt to tackle.

In addition to these high-profile issues, Georgia PIRG will be working to draw lawmakers' attention to several other serious threats to Georgia's environment, our health and our quality of life. Consider:

- Georgia has 520 hazardous waste sites across the state, including abandoned dry cleaners, old wood preserving operations and leaking landfills that threaten to contaminate drinking water.
- Georgia is home to 20 of the top 100 fastest-growing counties in the country. As development booms, so does environmental degradation, with mud and sediment dislodged by construction sliding into our rivers, streams and lakes.

The Legislature has shown their commit-

ment in the past to solving these problems by creating environmental trust funds that have raised millions of dollars for environmental protection. In 1992, they created the Hazardous and Solid Waste Trust Funds to clean up abandoned sites, help local governments clean up leaking landfills and eliminate scrap tire piles. In 2003, legislators passed a Georgia PIRG-supported fee system to ensure that developers obey erosion and sedimentation laws.

However, legislators been pulling a bait-and-switch by using environmental trust fund money for other purposes. Over the past two years, more than \$33 million has been diverted from the trust funds, which means it has not gone toward cleaning up pollution, toxic waste or waste reduction.

We cannot allow legislators to continue to misappropriate funds dedicated for environmental purposes. In the upcoming months, please call your legislators and let them know what you think about the issues you read about in this newsletter. You can also visit our Web site and sign up to receive updates and instructions on how you can make your voice heard in Atlanta.

Jill Johnson is the advocate for Georgia PIRG.

■ Georgia PIRG

Georgia PIRG is an advocate for the public interest. When consumers are cheated, or our natural environment is threatened, or the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, Georgia PIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation. Georgia PIRG's mission is to deliver persistent, result-oriented public interest activism that protects our environment, encourages a fair, sustainable economy, and fosters responsive, democratic government.

GEORGIA PIRG CITIZEN AGENDA

Georgia PIRG Citizen Agenda is the report of the Georgia Public Interest Research Group (Georgia PIRG), sent to members three times a year. Georgia PIRG Citizen Agenda is printed on recycled paper. **Contributors** Margie Alt, Cecily Anderson, Sabiha Basrai, Matthew Curtis, Dana Dorman, Stephanie Haynes, Jesse Holcomb, Jill Johnson, Ryan Moeckly, Ginie Pera, Preeti Prasad **Publications Director** Richard J. Hannigan **Design** Public Interest GRFX, (215) 985-1113 **Layout** The Principled Pen, (267) 514-8846

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