

# Georgia PIRG

CITIZEN AGENDA

A Report To Members Of The Georgia Public Interest Research Group

## Save Our Wild Forests

# Chattahoochee National Forest Threatened

Our national forests are in danger again. The Bush Administration has placed one of the most important land conservation initiatives in American history on the chopping block. On July 12, the administration announced its intention to repeal the Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

More than three years ago, Georgia PIRG and the state PIRGs played a critical role in helping to win the Roadless Rule, which set aside the last wild areas in our national forests from most logging and road-building.

According to Georgia PIRG Advocate Jill Johnson, "The administration has unleashed yet another assault on our last wild forests, once again siding with the timber industry against the wishes of the American public."

The rule protects 58.5 million acres of national forest in 30 states, including more than 63,000 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest in north Georgia. The Chattahoochee encompasses the 12,000-acre Mountaintown Roadless Area in Fannin and Gilmer counties near the Cohutta Wilderness Area. It also includes 8,500-acre Kelly Ridge Roadless Area located in Towns and Rabun counties.

Enacted in January 2001 following decades of scientific study, 600 public hearings, and a record-set-

ting public comment period, the Roadless Rule ensures that places like Kelly Ridge and Mountaintown can continue to provide clean drinking water, wildlife habitat and endless recreational opportunities.

The rule is the most popular conservation initiative in history, supported by more than 2.5 million public comments to date.

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**LAST REMAINING WILD FORESTS**—The Bush administration announced its intention to repeal the Roadless Rule on July 12—a move that will wipe out protections for nearly 58.5 million acres of pristine wild forests nationwide, including 63,000 acres of Georgia's Chatahoochee National Forest.

## Defend Georgia's Waters

# GA Clean Water Enforcement Underfunded

According to a new report by Georgia PIRG Education Fund, the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) sorely lacks the funds needed to properly monitor our waterways and enforce the law.

Georgia's pollution control programs are dangerously underfunded. Currently, Georgia spends \$4.38 million on point-source pollution control, a whopping \$6.6 million short of the \$11 million the Environmental Protection Agency model shows is needed to imple-

ment clean water protections.

"The Georgia EPD needs to enforce the law if we want to have waterways clean enough for fishing and swimming again," said Megan Fitzgerald, Georgia PIRG Clean Water Associate.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD), which has issued over 800 permits for discharge pollution, should be

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### Member Action

✓CLEAN WATER  
Log onto [www.georgiapirg.org](http://www.georgiapirg.org) and click on "Take Action" to send an e-mail to EPD Director Carol Couch urging her to support establishing permit fees for polluters so the EPD can crack down on illegal polluters.

## ■ No More Mercury

# 600,000 Tell White House To Get Tougher On Mercury

A record number of Americans have opposed a Bush Administration plan to delay critical reductions in mercury pollution from power plants for at least 10 years.

During a five-month comment period, more than 600,000 citizens, including thousands of Georgians, objected to the Administration's plan in e-mails, postcards and letters to EPA Administrator Michael Leavitt.



Emily Figdor

"We can do better. We already have the technology to virtually eliminate mercury emissions from power plants. But the Bush administration is allowing big energy companies to dictate what should be a common sense decision to protect our children's health," said Emily Figdor, a clean air advocate for Georgia PIRG's Washington, DC office at a June 29 press conference, held outside the White House.

Figdor cited EPA estimates that one in six women of childbearing age has enough mercury in her blood to put a fetus at risk of learning disabilities, developmental delays and other health problems. Eating contaminated fish is the primary way people are exposed to mercury.

Figdor also noted that power plants – the single largest uncontrolled source of mercury emissions – continue to emit unlimited amounts of mercury in the air. Under the Bush Administration's plan, power plants would emit more mercury than current law allows and would continue to do so over a longer period of time.

Evidence that powerful energy companies, like Southern Company, enjoyed undue influence in shaping the mercury plan

has intensified opposition to the plan. Recent investigations found that sections of the proposal were taken verbatim from memos written by two law firms representing large electric utilities and power and transmission companies.

Georgia PIRG, the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, Physicians for Social Responsibility, mothers and other community activists organized a Mother's March Against Mercury from Centennial Olympic Park to regional EPA headquarters during Mother's Day weekend. Dozens of people marched and wrote comments to the EPA urging the administration to take stronger action to protect children from toxic mercury. ■



Stephen Smith

**MOTHERS SPEAK OUT**—Georgia PIRG activists protest Bush administration policies as part of a Mothers' March Against Mercury in downtown Atlanta.

## Georgians Paying Too Much At The Gas Pump

What's the cost of outdated fuel economy policies in Georgia? For starters, according to "Going Nowhere," a report written by Georgia PIRG's Gretchen Dubeau, about \$52 million in higher gas prices over Memorial Day weekend alone.

The last time the U.S. significantly updated auto fuel economy standards was in 1975, after the first OPEC oil embargo, says Dubeau. Today, the fuel efficiency of a

motor vehicle is at a 23-year low: about 20.8 miles per gallon, according to the EPA.

Under the Energy Policy and Conservation Act, the Bush administration could increase fuel economy standards to 40 miles per gallon. Doing so over a 10-year period would cut vehicles' oil consumption by 30 percent by 2020, saving drivers an estimated \$16 billion at the pump. ■



Colleen Harrell

**FUEL ECONOMY STANDARDS**—Staff Attorney Gretchen Dubeau releases "Going Nowhere," which found that outdated fuel economy standards cost consumers millions.

### Member Action

✓ENERGY Please visit [www.newenergyfuture.com](http://www.newenergyfuture.com) to take action urging the Bush administration to reduce global warming by updating fuel economy policies.

## National News

### Credit Reports Found to Contain Errors

A June report on credit bureau accuracy, "Mistakes Do Happen," showed one in four reports has errors serious enough to cause a consumer to be denied credit. More than half the reports contained personal demographic indentifying information that was misspelled, outdated, belonged to a stranger or was otherwise incorrect. Almost a third of the credit reports contained credit accounts that had been closed by the consumer but incorrectly remained listed as open.

Georgia is one of only a handful of states that allow consumers to get one free credit report per year on request from all three national credit bureaus.

While urging Georgians to start ordering credit reports immediately, Jill Johnson, Georgia PIRG Advocate said, "A consumer's best defense is to check up on the credit bureaus by taking full advantage of their right to receive a free copy of their credit report."

### Health Threat Posed by Toxic Flame Retardant

A commonly used flame retardant is a threat to human health and should be phased out, according to "Body of Evidence," a report released by the state PIRGs' Toxic and Environmental Health Advocate Meghan Purvis on Feb. 18.

Manufacturers of common household products add decabrominated diphenyl ether (Deca) to plastics or fabrics to make them resist the spread of fire.

But a growing body of evidence shows that exposure to Deca may cause adverse health effects, including damage to the nervous system and impaired motor skills. Research shows Deca can break down into the types of flame retardants banned in the European Union and California due to bioaccumulative and toxic properties.

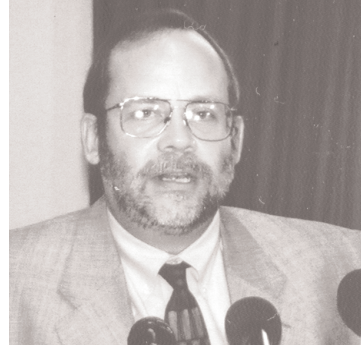
Just six weeks after the report

release, Reps. Hilda L. Solis (Calif.), Diana DeGette (Colo.) and Lynn Woolsey (Calif.) introduced the Toxic Flame Retardant Prohibition Act (HR 4076) to phase out and label certain brominated flame retardants, including Deca. Purvis helped to build support for this legislation and efforts in Congress to reform U.S. toxics policy more broadly, including requiring safety testing of chemicals before they are introduced to the market. ■

### PIRG Reports on High Cost of Textbooks

"The high cost of textbooks has frustrated students and faculty for many years," testified Georgia PIRG higher education advocate Merriah Fairchild on Capitol Hill in July.

Fairchild described the findings of the PIRG report, "Rip-off 101,"



Alicia Supernavage

**CONSUMER PROTECTION**—Ed Mierzewski of the PIRG's national consumer program releases "Mistakes Do Happen," a survey which found that many credit reports are riddled with errors, on June 17.

which documented that a student often spends as much as \$900 per year on textbooks.

PIRG's reform platform includes a "publisher pledge" to lower the cost of textbooks by selling textbooks unbundled from expensive cd-roms and only printing new editions when there is new information so that students can purchase less expensive, used books. ■

### Forests

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Since taking office, however, the Bush administration has made several attempts to undermine the Roadless Rule. The final blow came on July 12, when Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman proposed allowing governors to petition the federal government to protect roadless areas of national forest in their states and to propose logging, mining, and drilling in these precious places. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution editorialized that this "would amount to a regulatory loophole big enough to drive a convoy of logging trucks

through."

As of July 12, the public had 60 days to comment on the Bush plan. Georgia PIRG joined the Georgia Sierra Club, outdoor recreational industry representatives and tree farmers in alerting the public to the plan and encouraging citizens to make their views known on September 8 at a community meeting in Atlanta. Johnson and others called on the administration to withdraw its repeal and keep the rule intact in the Lower 48 states and restore protection to the Tongass Forest in Alaska. ■

### Clean Water

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closely monitoring all permitted facilities, writing permit limits that protect Georgia's waterways from dangerous levels of pollution, and issuing strong penalties to facilities that violate



Megan Fitzgerald

their pollution limits.

"Budgeting for Clean Water" calls for the state to begin charging a user fee to these facilities, rather than issuing permits for free as is the current practice. Many other southern states, including North and South Carolina, Florida, Alabama and Tennessee, already charge polluters a fee to help pay for clean water enforcement. ■

# Georgia PIRG



## ■ The Last Word

# A New Face For Georgia PIRG



Peter Cutts

Jill Johnson

This August, I was privileged to join Georgia PIRG's staff as the new public interest advocate. I'm thrilled to start the fall with a renewed focus on some of the key issues facing Georgia – a place I have called home for

more than five years.

I have spent the past four years working as the Southeast Field Director for the State PIRGs, based in Atlanta, but focused on advocating for environmental and consumer protections in Tennessee, South Carolina and Alabama.

I'm excited to be able to concentrate on Georgia. We've got a lot of research, public education and other work to do.

As one of the newer state PIRGs, Georgia PIRG was founded on the assumption that our state has more problems than it should tolerate and more solutions than it uses.

Take water pollution, for example. More than 60 percent of Georgia's waterways have been declared unsafe for swimming and fishing – a problem created in large

part by illegal discharge pollution from facilities and factories and run-off from development. The good news is that it's a problem we can fix. By following the example set by our neighboring states, we can establish polluter fees that give the state of Georgia the financial resources it currently lacks to properly monitor our waters and enforce the law.

It won't stop there. Rather than focusing solely on our polluted waterways, Georgia PIRG will start to identify the most outstanding waterways in the state - whether it's due to ecological or cultural significance – and work to protect them from degradation.

In addition, we will work to protect consumers from predatory lenders, skyrocketing prescription drug prices and credit report errors.

Real problems, practical solutions. And a determination to make those solutions a reality. That's what Georgia PIRG is all about. I'm very excited to be a part of it. Thank you, as a Georgia PIRG member and supporter, for making it possible.

*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

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**Editor** Margaret McKenna **Contributors** Margie Alt, Matthew Curtis, Wendy DePuy, Dana Dorman, Stephanie Haynes, Ryan Moeckly, Ginie Pera, Jill Johnson **Publications Director** Richard J. Hannigan **Design** Public Interest GRFX, (215) 985-1113

**TO CONTACT GEORGIA PIRG** Mail 1447 Peachtree Street NE, Suite 304, Atlanta, GA 30309 Phone (404) 892-3573 **E-mail** info@georgiapirg.org **Web** www.georgiapirg.org

Georgia PIRG  
Georgia Public Interest Research Group, Inc.  
1447 Peachtree Street NE, Suite 304  
Atlanta, GA 30309

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