PRESS RELEASE

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Altamaha Riverkeeper Calls for Withdrawal of Pulp Plant Permit Due to EPA Finding of Ongoing Pollution

*Jesup, GA*—Following the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) recent finding that the Altamaha River is currently impaired for both color and odor from polluted discharge downstream of the Rayonier Advanced Materials pulp plant, today the Altamaha Riverkeeper is calling on the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to withdraw the plant’s discharge permit.

The Riverkeeper’s letter, sent by its counsel to Jac Capp, Director of the EPD Water Division, cites a memorandum issued in March of this year in requesting that EPD issue a new permit that ensures protection under Georgia water quality standards, which prohibit excessive color and odor in wastewater discharges.

EPA’s memo addresses the condition of the river and cites an internal Rayonier AM study documenting odor-causing compounds in the plant’s wastewater. The memo concludes that that “the weight of multiple lines of evidence … supports a finding of impairment for the color and odor narrative water quality criteria for the lower Altamaha below the Rayonier plant.”

The memo reports numerous fishermen finding the downstream fish inedible and emphasizes that the long-standing problem of odor from the Rayonier AM discharge continues to such an extent that it causes federal employees to reek of the plant’s smell when they come back from site visits.

EPA’s memo echoes an Administrative Law Judge’s ruling in October 2016 that the permit issued by EPD violates Georgia water quality standards, and that EPD must impose more stringent regulations to restrict color and odor in the polluted discharge.

The administrative court’s decision followed a two week trial in June 2016 that included testimony from over a dozen witnesses about the extent to which the 50 to 60 million gallons of effluent discharged into the river daily affects citizens’ ability to use the river for fishing, swimming, boating, kayaking, and other activities.

During the trial, EPD continued to emphasize that the agency was “committed to undertaking a more thorough scientific analysis” of color and odor in the lower Altamaha River, and that it had the authority to reopen the permit if presented with additional information. EPD did not have EPA’s findings at the time the permit was issued in December 2015. A Wayne County judge subsequently overturned that ruling.

Representing Altamaha Riverkeeper, GreenLaw, Stack & Associates and the Southern Environmental Law Center are in the appeal process in challenging the pollution discharge permit granted to Rayonier , charging that the permit’s limits on odor and color do not go far enough to uphold state water quality standards.

Citing EPA’s findings in a letter to EPD, Altamaha Riverkeeper has respectfully requested that EPD withdraw the permit and issue a new permit that meets the requirements of the law in protecting the Altamaha River.

“EPA’s findings provide powerful evidence that the visible, foul-smelling pollution of the Altamaha River is much more than a nuisance that prevents people from using the river—it continues to put one of Georgia’s greatest rivers and the communities and wildlife that depend on it at risk,” said Jen Hilburn, Executive Director and Riverkeeper for Altamaha Riverkeeper. “EPD not only retains the right and power to withdraw the permit, but more importantly it has an obligation to issue a new permit that adequately protects our water quality.”

Click here to read ARK’s letter to EPD with EPA memo attached

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***Altamaha Riverkeeper*** *- Founded in 1999, is a non-profit organization dedicated to the protection and defense of the Altamaha Watershed – Georgia’s largest river system-- including the Ocmulgee, Oconee, Ohoopee and Altamaha Rivers and Georgia’s southern Golden Isles. Seeking to protect and preserve healthy swimmable, fishable, drinkable waters for our communities and wildlife.*

***The Southern Environmental Law Center*** *is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. With nine offices across the region (Charlottesville, VA; Chapel Hill, NC; Atlanta, GA; Charleston, SC; Washington, DC; Birmingham, AL; Nashville, TN; Asheville, NC; and Richmond, VA), SELC is widely recognized as the Southeast’s foremost environmental organization and regional leader. SELC works on a full range of environmental issues to protect the South’s natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region.* www.SouthernEnvironment.org

***Stack & Associates, P.C.*** *- Founded in 1993 through the vision of Donald D.J. Stack, Esq. is a premier environmental law office serving citizens, municipalities and corporations throughout the entire Southeast region.*

***GreenLaw*** *- As a 501(c)(3) law firm, GreenLaw advocates to preserve Georgia’s unique natural places and enforces compliance with environmental law through the court system. GreenLaw was founded in 1992 by attorneys, law professors, and judges committed to providing community groups in Georgia with the legal and technical tools needed to protect their environment and public health. For more information, please visit www.greenlaw.org.*