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Groups reach settlement with state, industry that better protects water quality, public health

Atlanta – Three river conservation groups in Georgia have reached a settlement with the state and industry groups that will better control polluted stormwater runoff from over 3,500 industrial facilities across Georgia – including poultry plants, chemical facilities, power plants, landfills and junkyards. Under the settlement, certain industries will for the first time be required to routinely check their stormwater for contaminants that can cause human disease. The settlement also provides for greater public access to information about stormwater-pollution control efforts by the state and by industry.

“Stopping water pollution at the source makes sense, and this settlement goes a long way toward doing just that,” said SELC attorney Jim Grode, who represents Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, Coosa River Basin Initiative, and Altamaha Riverkeeper. Last year, the three groups appealed the ‘one-size-fits-all’ industrial stormwater permit issued by the state Environmental Protection Division on several issues. A major flaw in the permit was the exemption of facilities discharging into streams already impaired by fecal coliform – the primary indicator that harmful bacteria are present. In 2002, Georgia’s list of impaired waters included 248 stream segments that exceeded health standards for fecal coliform, many of them downstream from poultry processing plants.

“Because of this settlement, facilities that might be discharging disease-causing contaminants into these streams must test their stormwater throughout the year to ensure they are not contributing to the problem,” said Joe Cook, Executive Director of the Coosa River Basin Initiative.

The permit also failed to require facilities to submit stormwater pollution control plans to the state, meaning essentially there was no oversight or enforceability. Under the settlement, EPD will require that the plans are made available to the public upon request. Also, facilities must submit an annual report showing sampling results and other information about how they are implementing their pollution-control plans.

“Requiring public access to this information will ensure that concerned citizens and watchdog groups like ours can continue to help protect our watersheds,” said Elizabeth Nicholas of the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper.

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“We are pleased that industry and the state have come together to work cooperatively with us to develop a permit that protects our water quality while providing guidance and flexibility for industry,” said Deborah Sheppard, Altamaha Riverkeeper Executive Director.

In addition, the settlement makes several clarifications and modifications to the general permit that address the river groups’ concerns. The settlement announced this week was reached by the river groups, EPD, the Georgia Industry Environmental Coalition and the Georgia Poultry Federation. EPD will draft and issue for public comment a revised permit based on the settlement. A final permit is expected this summer.

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