

Environmental Justice in Georgia

History

Atlanta, Georgia has many titles, and can now claim the title as the “[birthplace of the environmental justice movement](#)”. The earliest environmental justice activists were documented in [downtown Atlanta in 1900](#), when a furnace operator began dumping waste into Proctor Creek. The early activists were not able to keep Proctor Creek safe from pollution, but they did establish a trend of Black environmental activists advocating for public dollars to protect all the residents of Atlanta and for the recognition of environmental justice.

The communities around [Proctor Creek in West Atlanta](#) are still dealing with the ramifications of environmental injustice over 100 years later, in the form of recurring flooding, sewer overflows, and outdated infrastructure. These lead to a higher risk of pathogens, which bring disease. The area is also facing new development, gentrification, and lack of greenspace, increasing the prominence of environmental justice issues.

Environmental justice is [defined](#) by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

Current Injustices

Georgia’s history of environmental injustice carries through to the present day. The environmental injustices present in Georgia span from air pollution, food access and quality, water quality issues, hazardous waste sites, polluting plants, and more. A report published by Atlanta-based environmental law nonprofit, GreenLaw, found that race has the [strongest correlation to air, water, and land pollution](#) in Georgia. This is likely due to the history of racial and economic segregation in Georgia, perpetuated by [redlining practices](#) and the placement of [Interstate 20 as a boundary](#) between communities.

The impacts of environmental injustice are visible throughout Georgia, which has [twenty-three EPA designated superfund](#) sites. These are polluted areas that require long term cleanup of hazardous and toxic chemicals or contaminants. Fourteen of the twenty-two sites, or 64%, are in cities where the [majority population is Black](#). Given that Georgia has a majority white population, this is especially concerning.



United States Environmental Protection Agency View Cleanups In My Community Map

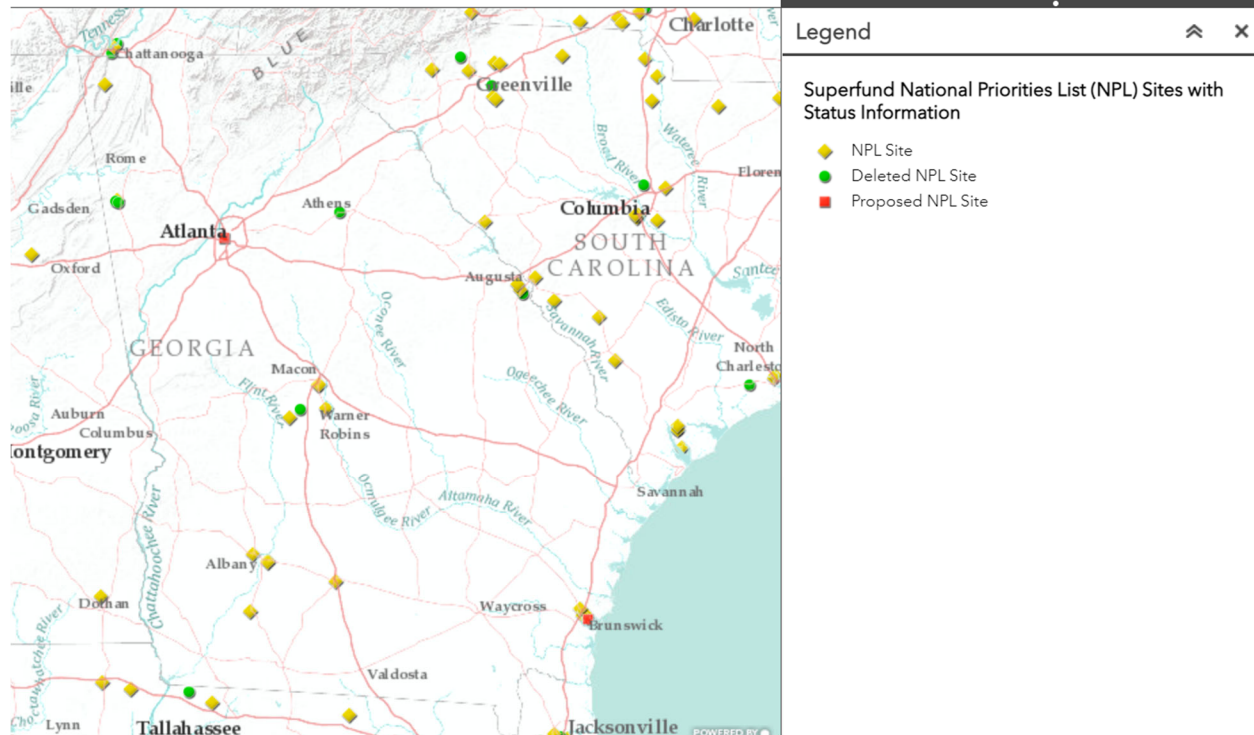


Figure 1. Superfund sites in Georgia. From:

<https://epa.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=33cebcdfdd1b4c3a8b51d416956c41f1>

Progress

Communities have been amplifying calls for preventing and correcting environmental injustices. Fulton County adopted the [Environmental Justice Initiative](#) in 2010 to encourage addressing environmental impacts on people, especially those that have been historically marginalized, prior to issuing permits for infrastructure or potential sources of pollution, and released a [comprehensive plan](#) in 2016.

UrbanHeatATL, a collaboration between the Spelman College Environmental and Health Sciences Program, the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, the Partnership for Southern Equity, the Georgia Tech Center for Serve-Learn-Sustain, the Urban Climate Lab, the Georgia Tech Global Change Program, and the City of Atlanta, aims to map how extreme heat risk reflects compounded impacts of historic racism and environmental injustice. Similar community coalitions and citizen science can be utilized to fight environmental injustice, ensuring those most affected by the health risks are involved in the research and solutions for these problems.

In the most recent legislative session, multiple environmental protection bills were proposed. One of particular importance was [HB 432](#), or the [Environmental Justice Act](#) of 2021, the first proposed legislation in Georgia that directly addresses environmental justice.



HB 432 establishes additional permit application requirements for new or expanded facilities that are located in overburdened communities, which the bill defines as communities that are low income, minority, or have limited English proficiency. These new requirements include: the preparation of an environmental justice impact statement, the issuance of the environmental justice impact statement to the department and to the local government in which the community is located, and public hearings in the community.

Get Involved

You can become an environmental justice advocate in Georgia, You can sign up to clean up local rivers, such as the [Chattahoochee River](#), [South River](#) and [Flint River](#). You can volunteer with local environmental justice organizations, like [Partnership for Southern Equity](#), [West Atlanta Watershed Alliance](#), or [Georgia WAND](#). You can also advocate for local environmental policies, such as HB 432. Georgia may have racial and economic divisions at the root of many environmental injustices in the state, but we have a role to play in ensuring these divisions do not determine the future health of communities and Georgians of all backgrounds.