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# LUMBER (LUMBEE) RIVER

**THREAT: Pollution from industrial agriculture and forever chemicals**

**STATES:** North Carolina,  
South Carolina

## SUMMARY

The Wild and Scenic Lumber River provides drinking water to local communities and is a refuge for fish and wildlife. But “forever chemicals,” or PFAS, as well as industrial agriculture, are polluting the river and making drinking water supplies unsafe. The state of North Carolina must direct funding to safeguard drinking water sources and ensure any permits for industrial agriculture include adequate protections for the river and public health.

## THE RIVER

The Lumber River — also known as the Lumbee River — flows through southeastern North Carolina into South Carolina, shaping wetlands, bottomland forests, and rural communities along its course. A distinctive blackwater river, known for its dark, tea-colored waters, it supports diverse plant and animal life, provides natural flood storage, and supplies drinking water, fishing, and recreation for the city of Lumberton and other communities throughout the basin.

The river is the ancestral homeland of the Lumbee People, who often call themselves the “people of the dark water.” For generations, the Lumber River has been central to Lumbee identity, survival, and cultural continuity. Today, the river remains a vital source of life and connection, particularly for Indigenous and rural communities who rely on it for food, water, and livelihoods.

The Lumber River is also nationally significant as the first blackwater river designated as a National Wild and Scenic River, and is the only blackwater river in North Carolina’s Natural and Scenic River System.

## THE THREAT

The Lumber River is facing escalating industrial pollution from large-scale industrial facilities. “Forever chemicals,” or PFAS (per and polyfluoroalkyl substances), contamination poses an especially severe and persistent threat. PFAS are a large group of man-made chemicals used in many industries, including textiles and food packaging, to make products resistant to water, grease, stains, and heat. Industrial waste containing “forever chemicals” has been disposed of at landfills and sent to wastewater treatment plants in the Lumber River Basin, even though these facilities are not designed to remove or contain these chemicals. Sampling conducted by the

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Continued

## WARNING

Largemouth bass and bowfin (or blackfish) in the Lumber River Basin contain higher than normal levels of mercury. Consumption of bass and blackfish should be limited to no more than two meals per person per month. Women of childbearing age and children should eat no bass or blackfish taken from this area until further notice.

STATE HEALTH DIRECTOR

JULIA RENDLEMAN

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### TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/  
LUMBERRIVER2026](https://www.americanrivers.org/lumberriver2026)

County indicates that the Robeson County Landfill — which accepted PFAS-containing waste for decades — is discharging forever chemicals into Big Marsh Swamp, a tributary of the Lumber River.

The county-owned Rocco Water Treatment Plant draws drinking water from wells located within 4,500 feet of the landfill. Testing has shown that finished water leaving this plant contains the highest PFAS levels of any drinking water treatment plant in North Carolina and the highest concentration of GenX — a toxic forever chemical — of any groundwater-based water system in the United States. The

Robeson County Water System serves more than 66,000 people in a county that consistently ranks among the lowest in North Carolina for health outcomes.

This pollution has led South Carolina to issue a fish consumption advisory for the Lumber River, threatening subsistence fishing and food security for families who rely on the river. These impacts fall disproportionately on Indigenous, rural, and low-income communities.

Pollution from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), slaughterhouses, and meatpacking facilities also generates significant waste that can enter waterways through runoff, spills, or inadequate controls. These pollutants degrade water quality, cause toxic algae outbreaks, lower oxygen levels, contribute to fish kills, and introduce bacteria that can make the river unsafe for recreation.

### WHAT MUST BE DONE

Protecting the Lumber River requires decisive action from both state and federal agencies. State and federal legislators, along with North Carolina Governor Josh Stein, can support communities that rely on the Lumber River by directing funding toward drinking water treatment upgrades, replacement water supplies, and long-term cleanup, and by closing regulatory gaps that allow forever chemicals and industrial animal agriculture pollution to threaten river health and drinking water supplies.

Additionally, this year, the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality will decide whether to issue permits that authorize industrial waste disposal at landfills, wastewater treatment plants, CAFOs, and slaughterhouses in the Lumber River Basin. These decisions include permits governing the disposal and management of PFAS-contaminated waste at landfills and wastewater treatment plants, as well as a new CAFO general permit that will govern most hog operations in the watershed. The Department must deny permits that would worsen pollution and strengthen protections to prevent contamination at the source.