

Press Release from the Haw River Assembly and Southern Environmental Law Center

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**Conservation Groups Act to Stop PFAS Pollution from
Burlington Wastewater Treatment Plants**

PFAS Detected Downstream from Plants and Sludge Fields Receiving Industrial Waste

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.—On behalf of the Haw River Assembly, the Southern Environmental Law Center today notified the City of Burlington of its intent to sue the city for its undisclosed and illegal per- and polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) pollution of the Haw River, its tributaries, and Jordan Lake, the drinking water sources for Pittsboro, North Chatham County, Cary and Apex. Testing also shows discharges of 1,4-dioxane from the facilities. PFAS and 1,4-dioxane can cause serious harm to people’s health.

“Families in Pittsboro and other downstream communities deserve to know that the water that comes out of their taps is safe.” said Geoff Gisler, senior attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center. “The Haw River is an incredible resource; stopping this preventable pollution will take us one step closer to making it as clean as it is beautiful.”

The notice letter cites violations of the Clean Water Act and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act by the city’s two wastewater treatment plants through unpermitted contaminated discharges into the Haw River and unpermitted applications of PFAS-contaminated waste sludge onto fields along the river and its tributaries. Both plants accept waste from industrial facilities. Wastewater treatment plants across North Carolina receive industrial waste. They discharge the resulting waste into our rivers and spread sludge on fields near waterways.

“These compounds are known to be harmful to human health,” said Emily Sutton, the Haw Riverkeeper. “Downstream drinking water users have been exposed to contaminated drinking water for years. It’s time to stop the pollution at the source and protect all downstream users and the ecological integrity of the Haw River basin.”

If Burlington does not stop its illegal pollution within 60 days after receiving the notice, the Southern Environmental Law Center will sue Burlington on behalf of the Haw River Assembly. Through their pre-treatment programs, wastewater treatment plants have the authority to require changes in the waste received from industrial facilities, such as adequate pollution controls

implemented at the industrial sources of the PFAS pollution. In Michigan, wastewater treatment plants are already implementing such requirements to stop PFAS pollution of waterways.

Burlington sprays PFAS-contaminated sludge from its treatment plants on nearby fields. The chemicals then run off the fields into the tributaries of the Haw River. These activities and direct discharge are contaminating the drinking water for communities downstream, including Pittsboro, North Carolina. The two conservation groups confirmed the contamination with their own sampling. This contamination poses serious human health risks and degrades water quality.

The Haw River intersects Jordan Lake from which North Chatham County and Cary draw drinking water. Cary also supplies Apex. Earlier tests documented high levels of PFAS in treated drinking water for Pittsboro and Cary.

Below Jordan Lake, the Haw River flows into the Cape Fear River and, farther downstream, supplies drinking water for Fayetteville and Wilmington.

PFAS is a class of thousands of synthetic chemicals that includes PFOA, PFOS, and GenX and is associated with serious health impacts. These contaminants are known as forever chemicals—they do not dissipate, dissolve, or degrade but stay in water, soil and our bodies.

1,4-dioxane is harmful to human health. It causes liver and kidney damage, and is suspected to cause cancer.

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For more than 30 years, the Southern Environmental Law Center has used the power of the law to champion the environment of the Southeast. With over 70 attorneys and nine offices across the region, 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 our natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region. www.SouthernEnvironment.org