

Climate Change and Environmental Justice

Impacts: Georgia

As the Democratic presidential candidates get set to square off in Georgia for the next debate, the state is in the midst of confronting the challenges posed by our changing climate. Georgia is grappling with severe impacts from climate change which have already cost billions of dollars, and are set to cost billions more as communities are flooded and livelihoods are destroyed. In Georgia, environmental justice issues are foundational to understanding the impacts of climate change, as low income and communities of color are disproportionately exposed to pollution. The continued fight for environmental justice and the following list of Georgia climate impacts helps illustrate why it is so critical that our next president has a plan to combat the climate crisis.

Sea level is rising faster in Georgia than other coastal areas. [The EPA](#) found that the land on the Georgia coast is sinking, and that “sea level is likely to rise one to four feet in the next century along the coast of Georgia.” [The Union of Concerned Scientists](#) said 40,000 units of residential property housing 79,000 people and worth \$13 billion are at risk of chronic flooding. The [Savannah Morning News](#) reported that Georgia had already lost more than \$15 million in property values from 2005 to 2017. Nowhere is the threat from sea level rise more evident than Tybee Island, a small city not far from Savannah. The only road to Tybee Island was [flooded 23 times](#) in 2015 alone. The [mayor of Tybee Island said](#), “I’m a Republican, but I also realize, by any objective analysis, the sea level is rising.”

Georgia has been hit by a series of hurricanes that have inflicted billions of dollars of damage. [The National Climate Assessment](#) found that hurricanes have been intensified by climate change. Georgia has been pummeled by a series of hurricanes: [Irma, Matthew, and Michael](#). [Hurricane Matthew](#) killed 3 people in Georgia and caused 250,000 people to lose power. [Irma inflicted \\$670,000,000 in insured damages](#) across 130,000 complaints. [Hurricane Michael in 2018](#) was estimated to be the cause of \$3 billion in lost crops, with between \$300 million and \$800 million coming from cotton losses. [One climate scientist said](#) in the aftermath of Hurricane Michael, “The storms get more intense. They also get bigger, they also last longer. The fact that the Panhandle had not been hit in quite the same way before is probably largely chance. It’ll happen sooner or later in your neck of the woods.”

Higher temperatures will put Georgians at risk. [The EPA projects](#) that by end of century, Georgia is “likely to have 45 to 75 days per year with temperatures above 95°F, compared with about 15 to 30 such days today.” [Nighttime temperatures](#) have increased, leading one atmospheric scientist to say, “When temperatures don’t cool off very much at nighttime, that’s when you start to have the health concerns.” A report from [the Union of Concerned Scientists](#) says that the Atlanta area could experience more than 20 days of 105°F per year by midcentury if no action is taken to curb emissions; for context, the state normally experiences one day. And an analysis by [Climate Central](#) found that “the typical number of heat wave days in Georgia is projected to increase nearly five-fold from slightly fewer than 15 to almost 70 days a year” by midcentury. Droughts in Georgia are expected to get [worse](#), which will threaten major crops such as peanuts, pecans, peaches, and the rare sweet Vidalia onion.

Destructive wildfires are becoming more common across the South. WABE reported that “Wildfires could become more common in the South.” [A 2017 wildfire scorched over 150,000 acres](#) on the Georgia-Florida border. The 2017 wildfire took [2 months](#) to be extinguished and had required 1,000 personnel to fight it. [Earlier this year wildfires burned 406 acres](#) over Memorial Day weekend. [At the end of September](#), the Georgia Forestry Commission’s Fire Chief said, “There’s a five-step fire danger system used nationally, and right now Georgia is in the four and five categories, indicating very high fire danger.” According to a [Climate Central](#) analysis, the number of days each year with high wildfire potential in Georgia is projected to double by midcentury.

PFOA and PFAS contamination has spread across Georgia and Alabama. PFOA and PFAS are chemicals which [the EPA](#) has found have adverse health effects on humans. [Carpet companies in Dalton, GA](#) have used the chemicals to make their products resistant to stains and in doing so have contaminated the water supply. [Alabama water utility companies in Gadsden and Centre](#) have sued [dozens of Georgia carpet manufacturers and suppliers](#) for contaminating their water with PFOA and PFAS. [In Georgia, cities of Rome and Chatsworth](#) have shifted their mix of drinking water sources in an attempt to minimize the presence of contaminants.

A landfill fire in Fulton County burned for 8 months. Fulton County residents endured [8 months of a burning landfill](#), beginning in September of 2018 and taking until May of 2019 to be put out. The fire required [\\$500,000 in emergency funds](#) to be extinguished. An [EPA study air quality study of the fire's impact](#) found higher levels of benzene, formaldehyde, and phosgene. [The fire sickened local residents](#), forcing them to wear masks outside. Earlier this year, [the owner of the landfill was fined over \\$1 million](#) and ordered to clean up the site.