

UGA to pay for public safety projects after hazardous waste violations

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By William Arthur Robinson, For the AJC

In addition to a previous fine for hazardous waste violations, the University of Georgia reached an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to spend \$333,333 on public safety initiatives, according to a consent agreement filed Nov. 10.

The consent agreement brought to light EPA allegations that UGA had not only violated federal regulations at its off-campus treatment facility [resulting in a \\$99,900 civil penalty](#), but it also mismanaged hazardous materials in several academic buildings on campus.

The EPA discovered leaks and spills in many science laboratories and classrooms during inspections in October 2014. Some of the leaked materials were dangerous chemicals, including sodium hydroxide, which can cause nausea, diarrhea, burns and blindness. The EPA allegedly found the spills and overflows in chemistry laboratories and classrooms, pharmacy laboratories, storage and equipment rooms and the University Printing Press.

Furthermore, the EPA claimed UGA failed to minimize the risk of fire, explosion or the sudden release of hazardous waste “which could threaten human health or the environment” at its facility located at 240A Riverbend Rd. The university was also cited for pouring diluted hazardous materials down sink drains in a biology building.

By signing the consent agreement, UGA President Jere Morehead committed the university to spending no less than \$333,333 in a Supplemental Environmental Project within the next 18 months. If UGA fails to spend that full amount, it must pay the remainder as a penalty.

UGA has three responsibilities under the SEP. First, it must fund lighting upgrades for low-income elementary and secondary schools across the state to replace mercury-containing lamps and fixtures. Second, it must assist low-income, Georgia high schools with hazardous waste disposal. Lastly, it must buy equipment for emergency responders to use in crises involving hazardous materials.

“The health and safety of our community is a top priority at the University of Georgia,” said John McCollum, associate vice president for environmental safety at the University of Georgia. “We look forward to working with our students, faculty and staff, as well as our local community, to minimize generation of hazardous waste and to improve the response and handling of hazardous materials.”

In addition to the alleged leaks, the university received a host of infractions for record keeping, contingency planning, employee training, materials identification and conducting inspections.

“As part of its comprehensive review, the EPA made no finding of any environmental release that would have placed UGA students, faculty or staff in danger,” Greg Trevor, UGA executive director of media communications, wrote in a statement.

The terms of the consent agreement state that UGA neither admits nor denies the factual allegations and determinations made by the EPA. In 2015, UGA hired a third-party contractor to verify that all alleged violations were addressed, according to the statement.

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