American Rivers Announces "America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006"

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Washington, DC -- New Orleans, one of America's most cherished cities, drowned last year in large part due to the government's failed efforts to prevent flooding, and these mistaken approaches also put other communities at risk, as detailed in American Rivers' new report, America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006. Nearly a century of federal flood damage reduction efforts poured tons of concrete and billions of dollars into massive engineering projects that too often destroy natural flood protection and lure communities into harm's way, according to the report.

"When people are afraid of something, we build walls, and building levees has been the knee jerk response to overflowing rivers. But the flooding of New Orleans shows levees can and do fail, and the biggest risk occurs where wetlands and natural buffers are no longer there to provide flood protection," said Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers. "Hurricane Katrina was a wake-up call it is time to strike a balance among natural flood protection, engineering, and keeping people out of harm's way."

For more than twenty years, the annual America's Most Endangered Rivers report has highlighted rivers facing major turning points in the following year, where action by citizens can make a huge difference for both community well-being and river health. The report also spotlights a significant, current threat to the nation's rivers. The organization believes that 2006 will be a pivotal year for addressing the mismanagement of our waterways by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps).

"Floods are natural events, but they can become unnatural disasters when coupled with poor planning, unwise development and an over-reliance on engineering to provide flood protection," Wodder said. "While levees and other structural solutions will continue to be part of the nation's flood protection strategy, the key to ensuring community safety lies in working with nature, not against it."

New Orleans is not the only U.S. city to face the threat of flooding. The Pajaro River in California, this year's #1 most endangered river, demonstrates the danger of relying solely on engineering to protect communities like Watsonville and Pajaro. The current set of levees is not adequately protecting people living near the Pajaro from flooding. Unfortunately, the Corps is poised to perpetuate this failed approach on the river, without addressing problems like gravel mining and development that happen upstream and have
a dramatic effect on river levels. Instead of repeating the mistakes of the past, the report argues the Corps should develop a new plan that works with the whole river and includes solutions to the Pajaro's many upstream problems.

American Rivers is calling on the Bush administration and Congress to overhaul the Corps' outdated approach to river management, through new policies including: stronger natural resource protection; new guidelines that account for the risk of wetlands destruction and floodplain development; independent review of agency

projects; and a renewed focus on high priority projects. To that end, American Rivers urges Congress to pass legislation introduced by Senators Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) and John McCain (RAriz.)
the Water Resources Planning and Modernization Act of 2006 (S. 2288) that would address many of the fundamental flaws in the Corps' current planning process.

"We just can't afford to keep repeating the mistakes of the past. Congress must change the nation's approach to water resources and modernize Corps project planning. If we can't make these common-sense changes, we will continue to put lives, communities, jobs, and the environment at risk," Wodder added.

The devastation of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina is the most vivid though hardly the only example of misplaced reliance on engineering that destroys natural watershed functions. Several of the rivers on this year's America's Most Endangered Rivers list would benefit from a more balanced approach:

In a losing battle against flooding, the Army Corps has built more than 22 miles of levees along the Pajaro River (#1 Most Endangered River) in California's central coast, and then compounded the problem by stripping them of trees and other vegetation. Coupled with decades of sand and gravel mining in the river's upper tributaries, these levees have actually exacerbated high-water events, and failed to protect communities from floods.

New home construction in the floodplain of the Yellowstone River (#2) has led to an escalating and unsuccessful attempt to straitjacket this wild, beautiful river with riprap and other hard structures. Clearing cottonwoods and other riverside vegetation has destroyed valuable natural flood protection and wildlife habitat.

Extreme manipulation of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee has also hurt the Caloosahatchee River (#7), a major source of drinking water, a home to endangered manatees, and a $2 billion recreational resource. Periodic discharges of huge volumes of toxic agricultural runoff from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee threaten human health, commercial and sport fishing, and wildlife that depend on the river.

The America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006 report highlights the emerging science of river restoration, which promotes cost-effective, natural solutions. This approach can make rivers safer for the people living near them, while also securing cleaner drinking water, providing better habitat for wildlife, and enhancing recreational opportunities. For more than two decades, American Rivers has called attention to the nation's most endangered rivers. A national non-profit conservation organization with more than 75,000 members and e-activists, and hundreds of partner organizations, American Rivers is dedicated to protecting and restoring healthy natural rivers and the variety of life they sustain for people, fish, and wildlife. To learn more, visit http://www.americanrivers.org.

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006

#1 Pajaro River: The Pajaro River, and the safety and well being of its riverside communities, are at a critical turning point. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is poised to recommend yet another old-style, over-engineered flood control project that will actually produce an ever increasing risk of catastrophic flooding. To protect these

communities and restore the health of the Pajaro, the Corps must adopt a modern and comprehensive flood protection project that works with nature — instead of against it.

#2 Upper Yellowstone River: Dubbed “America’s last best river” by National Geographic Magazine, the Yellowstone River faces burgeoning riverside development, with much of the construction occurring in the river’s floodplain and involving considerable alteration of the wild river’s banks. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the local officials of Park County, Montana must move urgently to guide development in a way that protects one of America’s most scenic rivers and avoids putting people in harm’s way.

#3 Willamette River: Home to more than 70 percent of the state’s population, the Willamette River Valley is the heart and lifeblood of Oregon, but a loophole in state regulations allows companies to dump millions of pounds of pollution into the river in “toxic mixing zones.” The governor must make good on his promise to clean up the Willamette and end the use of toxic mixing zones on the river.

#4 Salmon Trout River: The pristine Salmon Trout River is at the heart of one of Michigan’s largest remaining wild areas and provides drinking water and unparalleled recreation. However, a mining operation is poised to convert part of the river’s headwaters into an industrial zone, creating a risk of acid mine drainage that could contaminate the river and harm Lake Superior. The state government must deny the mining permit application for this mine.

#5 Shenandoah River: One of America’s most storied rivers, the peaceful Shenandoah is facing an onslaught of development that threatens the tranquility and clean water that have attracted people to the river for centuries. County governments along the Shenandoah have a rapidly-closing window to get a handle on runaway development before it changes the character of the river and valley forever.

#6 Boise River: Idaho’s Boise River provides drinking water, irrigation, and prized, family-friendly recreation, but if a Canadian mining company moves ahead with plans to blast two giant pits and remove over 1,000 feet of mountain in the river’s headwaters, it could also deliver cyanide and mine run-off to Idaho’s capital city. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality should deny the mining company’s request for a permit, and the U.S. Forest Service should work diligently to protect the section of the Boise River within its jurisdiction.

#7 Caloosahatchee River: Drinking water for tens of thousands of people, a worldrenowned haven for birds and other wildlife, and the heart of a $2 billion local tourist economy, the Caloosahatchee is reeling from the effects of the Corps of Engineers’ decades of manipulation of Florida’s fabled “River of Grass.” Regular discharges of millions of gall ons of fertilizer and toxic laden water from Lake Okeechobee into the river threaten the health and economy of South Florida. The Corps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local authorities must work together and quickly to regulate not only the toxic discharges from the lake but the agricultural runoff and other pollution that are fouling it in the first place.

#8 Bristol Bay: The Bristol Bay watershed in Alaska is an intricate system of lakes, streams and rivers that is the source of the single largest salmon run on earth, on the Kvichak River. But the Bay’s spectacular salmon runs and bountiful wildlife are threatened by plans to blast North America’s biggest open pit, cyanide heap mine into

the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak Rivers. As it crafts a management plan for the area in 2006, the Bureau of Land Management must protect these irreplaceable rivers in the only way that is sure to work, by closing the area to mining.

#9 San Jacinto River: The Republic of Texas was born on the banks of the San Jacinto, and the river and its tributaries still nurture remnants of the state's fabled Big Thicket bottomland hardwood forests. But unregulated sand mining, in which companies peel off huge swaths of forest to excavate the sand beneath them, threatens the health of this storied river and the people who depend on it for drinking water and recreation. It is time for Texans to protect what's left of this unique place and have some say over the sand mining companies that are stripping off and hauling away the land that once absorbed and filtered the waters of the San Jacinto.

 # 10 Verde River: As a critical source of drinking water for Phoenix and other communities, and a haven for boating, fishing and birdwatching, the Verde is a jewel in the desert, but could find itself drastically diminished if plans move forward to increase pumping of water out of the aquifer that feeds the river, pitting one community's water supply against another. The Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local governments must closely review the impacts on the Verde of any pumping from the Big Chino aquifer, especially the project recently proposed by the City of Prescott and the Town of Prescott Valley.

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