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**CALOOSAHATCHEE RIVER AMONG AMERICA'S "MOST
ENDANGERED"**

Caloosahatchee #7 on American Rivers' Annual List Released Today

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Report available to the public April 19, 2006 at <http://www.AmericanRivers.org>

WASHINGTON – Massive releases of highly-polluted water from Lake Okeechobee by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) threaten the health of the incredibly productive Caloosahatchee River, which American Rivers listed today as America's #7 most endangered river for 2006. The annual *America's Most Endangered Rivers* report highlights ten rivers facing a major turning point in the coming year, where action by citizens can make a huge difference for both community well-being and river health.

American Rivers and its partners on the Caloosahatchee, the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, today called on the Corps and the SFWMD to develop and implement a proactive water quality plan that includes specific pollution reduction targets aimed at the source of the pollution.

Drinking water for tens of thousands of people, a world-renowned haven for birds and other wildlife, and the heart of a \$2 billion local tourist economy, the Caloosahatchee is reeling from discharges of millions of gallons of fertilizer and toxic laden water from Lake Okeechobee into the river.

"The Corps has taken decades to turn the waters of South Florida into a massive Rube Goldberg contraption, one that simply doesn't work," said Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers. "Now the bill has come due and it's past time to get serious about fixing the complicated, widespread problems along the Caloosahatchee."

Successive severe hurricane seasons in recent years have created dangerously high water levels in the lake, exacerbating water quality problems in Lake Okeechobee by churning

fertilizer-laden sediments and re-suspending them into a trillion gallons of lake water. Prompted by limits on storage volume, the SFWMD now regularly releases polluted water — up to 69,500 gallons per second — from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee River.

These water releases sacrifice the river's water quality. The combination of re-suspended sediments and fertilizers has turned Lake Okeechobee water into what local reporters liken to chocolate soup, which now flows regularly into the Caloosahatchee, and eventually reaches San Carlos Bay. This leads to algal blooms that deplete dissolved oxygen, block sunlight, clog boat intakes, and produce fish-killing toxins. These toxins are also a threat to human health.

“The Caloosahatchee is the lifeblood of all of Southwest Florida,” said Mary Rawl of the Caloosahatchee River Citizens Association. “The crisis point is right now and we cannot continue to let the river be a disposal conduit of last resort for Central and South Florida.”

The report calls on the Corps to ensure that water discharges are managed to dramatically reduce the devastating impacts to the Caloosahatchee as they finalize a new discharge schedule by January 2007. At the same time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must ensure that any new water management plan complies strictly with the Endangered Species Act, while the Corps and SFWMD develop and implement a water quality plan that includes specific pollution reduction targets that address pollution flowing into Lake Okeechobee, as well as that flowing out of the lake into the Caloosahatchee.

“We have reached a pivotal time in the business of water management for Lake Okeechobee,” said Erick Lindblad of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. “The system of structures and the policies which guide their use can no longer provide for the protection of the environment so crucial to the economy of Central and South Florida.”

“The problems of the Caloosahatchee River can be solved if federal, state, and local regulators work together to obtain more surficial storage, treat more water, and time releases to mimic natural water flow,” said Andrew McElwaine, President and CEO of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

About America's Most Endangered Rivers

Each year, American Rivers solicits nominations from thousands of river groups, environmental organizations, outdoor clubs, local governments, and taxpayer watchdogs for the America's Most Endangered Rivers report. The report highlights the rivers facing the most uncertain futures rather than those suffering from the worst chronic problems. The report presents alternatives to proposals that would damage rivers, identifies those who make the crucial decisions, and points out opportunities for the public to take action on behalf of each listed river.

This year's report details how 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. The rivers named in this year's *America's Most Endangered Rivers* report are: Pajaro River (Calif.), Upper Yellowstone River (Mont.), Willamette River (Ore.), Salmon Trout River (Mich.), Shenandoah River (Va. & W. Va.), Boise River (Idaho), Caloosahatchee River (Fla.), Bristol Bay (Alaska), San Jacinto River (Tex.), Verde River (Ariz.).

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