American Rivers Blasts Army Engineers for Endangering Waterways

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WASHINGTON, DC, April 21, 2006 (ENS) - In the 2006 version of its annual list of America's 10 Most Endangered Rivers, the conservation organization American Rivers is focused on reversing the damage it says has been done by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The organization believes that 2006 will be a pivotal year for addressing the mismanagement of U.S. waterways by the Corps.

For more than 20 years, American Rivers, a national conservation organization with more than 75,000 members and e-activists and hundreds of partner organizations, has called attention to the nation's most endangered rivers.

This year, the group points to nearly a century of federal flood damage reduction efforts that have poured tons of concrete and billions of dollars into massive engineering projects. These projects "too often destroy natural flood protection and lure communities into harm's way," says the environmental group, using the failure of the New Orleans levees as the prime example.

"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," she said.

The risk of flooding imperils other locations in addition to New Orleans. American Rivers says, placing four rivers managed in part by the Corps on this year's Most Endangered List.

American Rivers has named the Pajaro River in California as this year's #1 most endangered river, saying that the current set of levees is not adequately protecting people living near the Pajaro and Watsonville from flooding.

The Pajaro River just upstream from Watsonville is a narrow infilled channel, bordered by benches on both sides that extend out to protective levees. On the extreme left meander, the levee broke in 1995, flooding the land to the right of the river. (Photo courtesy Pajaro River Watershed) In a losing battle against flooding, the Corps has built more than 22 miles of levees along the Pajaro River near California's central coast, and then stripped them of trees and other vegetation. Coupled with decades of sand and gravel mining in the river's upper tributaries, American Rivers believes these levees have made the effects of high water events worse, and have failed to protect Pajaro and Watsonville from floods.

The group warns that the Corps "is poised to perpetuate this failed approachon 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 rivers as a whole, and includes solutions to the Pajaro's many upstream problems.

For its part, the Corps says on its website, "The Corps is working around the clock with its contractor partners to restore the damaged sections of the hurricane protection system to their authorized design height prior to the 2006 hurricane season. The Corps is working to make the New Orleans levee system better and stronger than ever before."

"The culture of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is to work openly and collaboratively with others to do what's right when it comes to theenvironment," the Corps says.

Still, American Rivers is calling on the Bush administration and Congress to overhaul the Corps' approach to river management, through new policies including stronger natural resource protection.

The group is asking that the administration establish new guidelines that account for the risk of wetlands destruction and floodplain development, independent reviews of agency projects, and a renewed focus on high priority projects.

American Rivers urges Congress to pass legislation introduced by Senators John McCain, an Arizona Republican, and Russ Feingold, a Wisconsin Democrat, known as the Water Resources Planning and Modernization Act of 2006 (S. 2288). Wodder the measure says would address many of the fundamental flaws in the Corps' current planning process.

"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."

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006

Pajaro River: California's 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 American Rivers warns will produce an ever increasing risk of catastrophic flooding.

Upper Yellowstone River: 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 Army Corps is urged to "guide development in a way that protects one of America's most scenic rivers and avoids putting people in harm's way."

Willamette River: Home to more than 70 percent of Oregon's population, the Willamette River Valley is threatened by a loophole in state regulations allows companies to dump millions of pounds of pollution into the river in "toxic mixing zones."

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.

Shenandoah River: The Shenandoah River Watershed encompasses over 1.5 million acres in Virginia and West Virginia. It 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 limit runaway development before it changes the character of the river and valley.

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, Boise.

The Caloosahatchee River is the major source of freshwater to the Caloosahatchee Estuary and southern Charlotte Harbor, Florida. (Photo courtesy USGS)

Caloosahatchee River: Drinking water for tens of thousands of people, a world renowned haven for birds and other wildlife, and the heart of a $2 billion Everglades tourist economy, Florida's Caloosahatchee River is subject to regular discharges of millions of gallons of water laden with fertilizer and toxics from Lake Okeechobee. The discharges threaten human health, commercial and sport fishing, and wildlife that depend on the river. The Corps of Engineers' is blamed for "decades of manipulation of Florida's fabled River of Grass."

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, known as the Pebble Mine, into the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak Rivers.

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 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 river and the people who depend on it for drinking water and recreation.

10 Verde River: As a critical source of drinking water for Phoenix, Arizona 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 Big Chino aquifer that feeds the river, pitting one community's water supply against another. The Corps of Engineers is urged to reconsider pumping water out of the aquifer. The America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2006 report features the emerging science of river restoration, which promotes cost-effective, natural solutions to the problems affecting these waterways. To view the full report, visit http://www.americanrivers.org.

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