

AMERICA'S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS OF 1999



BRINGING RIVERS TO LIFE



American Rivers

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AMERICA'S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS OF 1999



1. LOWER SNAKE RIVER

2. MISSOURI RIVER

3. ALABAMA-COOSA-TALLAPOOSA RIVER BASIN

4. UPPER SAN PEDRO RIVER

5. YELLOWSTONE RIVER

6. CEDAR RIVER

7. FOX RIVER

8. CARMEL RIVER

9. COAL RIVER

10. BEAR RIVER

FOX

ILLINOIS, WISCONSIN

FOX RIVER

RISK: SPRAWL, POLLUTION, STATE AGENCY INACTION

SUMMARY

In the 1970s, the Clean Water Act reduced industrial and municipal pollution in the Fox River and transformed the river from an unhealthy eyesore to a popular recreation destination. Today, the impacts of urban sprawl from the rapidly growing Chicago area threaten to shatter this success story. If state and local officials do not take steps now to improve municipal wastewater treatment and reduce agricultural and suburban runoff, the river will revert to its degraded past.

THE RIVER

The Fox River flows 115 miles from southern Wisconsin to northern and central Illinois. In Kane County, Illinois, the Fox is the centerpiece of historic towns such as Elgin, St. Charles, Geneva, Aurora, and Batavia. These communities have worked hard to restore their downtown riverfront areas. More than eight million people live within 100 miles of the Fox, and 200,000 people get their drinking water from the river.

The Fox River offers excellent recreational opportunities and is important to the region's tourism industry. The river supports 48 nature preserves, 118 natural areas, and numerous conservation and forest preserves. The river flows through Chain O'Lakes (one of the most heavily used recreational areas in the Midwest) and five state-run recreation sites that have a total annual attendance of more than three million people who spend \$37 million.

THE RISK

The Fox River basin lies on the fringes of suburban Chicago and is threatened by the area's sprawling growth. In the past 20 years, the basin's population has grown 30 percent, and employment and vehicle miles traveled have grown by 75 percent. A 1995 report by the Illinois Department of Energy and Natural

Resources projected that by 2010, new development would cause sewage plant discharges into the Fox to increase by 50 percent over 1990 levels. Fertilizers and pollutants from suburban lawns and parking lots also wash off the land and pollute the river.

The largest threat to the Fox River is increased levels of pollutants from human waste and chemical fertilizers. Elevated levels of these pollutants in the Fox can spur growth of unnatural blooms of algae that set off a reaction reducing the amount of oxygen in the river and harming fish and other wildlife. The sewage treatment plants in the region are not equipped to handle the projected 50 percent increase in sewage, and little effort has been made to reduce runoff from agricultural fields, suburban lawns, and urban pavement.



SPRAWL FROM THE GROWING CHICAGO AREA IS CHEWING UP LAND AND THREATENING THE FOX RIVER WITH SEWAGE PLANT DISCHARGES AND POLLUTED RUNOFF (PHOTO: JERRY PAULSON).

The Fox drains into the Illinois and ultimately the Mississippi River, contributing to severe pollution problems as far away as the Gulf of Mexico. Although polluted runoff from farm fields is a significant contributor to this problem, urban rivers like the Fox are offsetting the benefits provided by farmers implementing better land management practices. Consequently, much of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers remain too polluted to support fishing and swimming.



AS THE FOX RIVER FLOWS THROUGH CHAIN O' LAKES, IT SUPPORTS ABUNDANT WILDLIFE AND NUMEROUS RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES (PHOTO: JASON LINDSEY).

Although urban sprawl is already a problem for the Fox and future growth will be substantial, state officials have failed to take action. They excluded the Fox from a list of over 300 Illinois waterways in need of a clean up plan; proposed weakening limits on sewage plant discharges of ammonia; and have been lax in regulating sewage treatment plants.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Decision makers in the Fox River basin must not ignore the impacts of metro Chicago's current and projected sprawl. If the region is to control future pollution problems, regional growth must be properly managed to minimize impacts on the river. Legislators and regulators must implement "smart growth" land use planning and work to reduce stormwater discharges and other non-point source runoff. Legislators should also approve Illinois House Bill 1690, which would provide new funding for cleaning up the Fox and other Illinois rivers by establishing a water pollution permit fee.

Illinois' new governor, George Ryan, campaigned on promises to improve water pollution control efforts. Governor Ryan must act on his pledge to better protect the Fox and other Illinois rivers. State and local officials must take steps now to develop the infrastructure needed to handle projected increases in population and waste pollution. They must begin planning immediately for future sewage treatment needs

to enable plants to expand capacity or develop alternative treatment approaches over the next decade. They must also establish strong standards for phosphorous, ammonia, and other pollutants.

Finally, Congress must expand efforts to improve water quality. In February, officials met with farmers, environmentalists, and barge shippers to develop a basin-wide plan to clean up Mississippi River tributaries like the Fox. Congress should act quickly to implement this plan that will increase funds for better land management practices, monitoring, and outreach.

MORE INFORMATION:

Jeff Stein, American Rivers, 202-347-7550,
jstein@amrivers.org

Jack Darin, Sierra Club/Illinois Chapter, 312-251-1680, illinois.chapter@sierraclub.org

Kathe Lacey-Anderson, Friends of the Fox River,
815-455-1537,
laceyand@mc.net

Cindy Skrukrud,
McHenry County
Defenders, 815-338-
0393, mcdef@owc.net

Robert Moore, Prairie
Rivers Network, 217-
344-2371, rob-
moore@earthlink.net



DITCHED, DAMMED, AND DIVERTED: AMERICA'S RIVERS IN TROUBLE

W e've all seen it and felt it...been in the middle of it. Sprawl.

Ribbons of highway jammed with cars and trucks stretching as far as the eye can see; the haphazard scattering of strip malls, fast food joints and gas stations across the landscape; cookie cutter housing developments dotting farm fields and bumping up against the last remaining bits of forest and wetlands surrounding our communities.



Many of us are watching with frustration and a growing sense of futility as sprawl seeps into every aspect of our lives — burdening us with everything from lengthy commutes to polluted air. It must come as no surprise, then, that sprawl is one of the fastest growing, most ominous threats to our nation's rivers. Sprawl devours wetlands and floodplains and destroys important wildlife habitat. Sprawl also wreaks havoc on both the quality of water in a river and on the amount of water flowing between the banks.

When runoff carrying toxins and excess sediment flows into waterways, it poisons plants and animals and smothers their habitat. Seattle's unbridled development, for example, is polluting the Cedar River and destroying one of the most productive salmon and steelhead runs in the Northwest. Chicago's rapid growth is overloading the city's sewage treatment system and pushing excess waste into the Fox River.

Desperately in need of water to serve exploding populations, towns and cities are pumping water from nearby rivers often faster than it can be replenished. Fragile desert rivers are suffering — Arizona's San Pedro is being rapidly depleted by surrounding communities. Salt Lake City, with one of the highest per capita water use rates in the country, wants to divert even more water from the Bear River, home to a world-renowned wildlife refuge. Wildlife is also imperiled on California's Carmel as burgeoning development sucks the river dry. And in the East, Atlanta's growth is sapping the Alabama-Coosa-Tallapoosa River Basin, one of the richest sources of freshwater aquatic animals in the world.

As sprawl eats away at these rivers, we continue to manhandle other waterways in a never-ending quest for profit and control. Never before have people had such power over land





and riverscapes. "Moving mountains" was once just a figure of speech. But now, the unthinkable has become reality in West Virginia where, in order to mine coal, mountaintops are blasted away and dumped into the Coal River. The Yellowstone is also being abused, as the Army Corps of Engineers attempts to control flooding by constructing levees

and piling rocks

(called "rip-rap") along the river banks. The Corps has already altered two-thirds of the



Missouri River beyond recognition with channels and dams, destroying wildlife habitat and defaming the storied river of Lewis and Clark. But the most alarming change of all has occurred on Washington's Lower

Snake River. Over a million salmon and steelhead once migrated up the Snake every year. But today, the river's epic salmon runs are on the brink of extinction because four federal dams and reservoirs built to support barge navigation (and create a seaport in the Rocky Mountains, nearly 500 miles away from the ocean) have destroyed the river's natural flow.

Will we allow these salmon to slip away? Will we stand by as rivers across the country are drained to fuel sprawling cities? Will we let pollution spoil the rivers that flow through our communities? We hope you will join us in saying "no." And we hope that after reading about the rivers in this report, you will join us in the fight to save these great natural treasures.

Rebecca R. Wodder

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President
American Rivers