

Chilkat and Klehini Rivers Named Among America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2023

Contact:

David Moryc, American Rivers Senior Director of River Protections
dmoryc@americanrivers.org | 503-307-1137

Gershon Cohen, Alaska Clean Water Advocacy Project Director
gershon@aptalaska.net | 907-314-0228

American Rivers has named the Chilkat and Klehini Rivers among *America's Most Endangered Rivers*[®], pointing out the threats of a proposed copper and zinc mine that would likely result in contamination of nearby creeks that feed directly into the two rivers. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) must enforce the Clean Water Act to ensure appropriate permits are obtained for the Palmer Project, by the Canadian and Japanese consortium American Pacific Mining and Dowa Mining and Metals. Furthermore, in order to best care for the watershed, Congress should establish co-management of the area's federal lands with the Chilkat Indian Village of Klukwan.

"The Chilkat Valley is an incredibly unique habitat for all five species of wild salmon, bald eagles, brown bears, and people because the Chilkat and Klehini Rivers are pristine and productive. Developing this copper/zinc mine will result in a huge loss for the region, Alaska, the nation, and the rest of the world," said Gershon Cohen, Project Director of Alaska Clean Water Advocacy.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of salmon swim from the Pacific Ocean into the Jil̄káat Aani Ƙa Héeni (Chilkat River watershed) to spawn. The Klehini is a main tributary of the Chilkat, and both flow through the Alaska Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, which is critical habitat hosting the largest congregation of eagles in the world. Additionally, it is home to the Chilkat Tlingits and the people of Haines, Alaska, who depend on these waters for their food, economy, and culture. Public support will play a significant role in advocating for co-management of the watershed with the Chilkat Indian Village of Klukwan, whose people have been caretakers of this land for thousands of years.

"Land utilization is fundamentally important to the people of the Chilkat Indian Village at Klukwan (Federally Recognized Tribe). Our ability to live off the land and continue to harvest the wild stocks of salmon, to hunt the bear, and gather the berries that grow in our traditional territory sustains us today, as it has since time immemorial. The natural riches of these lands and waters have allowed our people not only to survive, but to thrive, for untold generations. Endangering the Chilkat River ecosystem with a hard rock mine will have devastating effects on our Tribal people that rely on the Chilkat River and Chilkat Valley as our sustainable food source."

- Kimberley Strong, President
Chilkat Indian Village

The Palmer Project is moving to the next stage of mining development where developers look to dig a mile-long "exploratory" tunnel under the Saksaiá Glacier. This is directly above the Klehini River and the excavation will create huge waste storage piles and a major wastewater discharge that will almost certainly contaminate the creeks and rivers downstream. This development would be extremely dangerous for the already fragile ecosystem of the Chilkat Valley.

Congress and the EPA need to uphold the Clean Water Act and ensure social and environmental justice is served. Both entities must act now to ensure that fundamental protections guaranteed by the CWA are not abandoned, and mandate that the mining consortium apply for a standard surface water discharge permit. This will ensure all applicable State and federal water quality standards are met.

“Wild salmon are under increasing threat from climate change and ocean conditions, which means we must do all we can to protect freshwater habitat. The Canadian and Japanese owners of this project have refused to engage with Haines or the CIV, have not applied for or received the proper permits related to water quality and clearly don’t care about the health and productivity of the Chilkat watershed,” said Alaska Director for Rivers Without Borders Chris Zimmer. “We can’t let short term mine profits for foreign companies threaten the long-term health of the Chilkat watershed and those who depend on it.”

The annual America’s Most Endangered Rivers report is a list of rivers at a crossroads, where key decisions in the coming months will determine the rivers’ fates. The report has helped spur many successes including the removal of outdated dams, the protection of rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and the prevention of harmful development and pollution.

Rivers in the region listed as most endangered in past years include the Chilkat River (2019), Stikine River (2019) and Rivers of Bristol Bay (2018).

America’s Most Endangered Rivers® of 2023

1) Colorado River, Grand Canyon (Arizona):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated water management

AT RISK: Ecosystem health, reliable water delivery, regional economy

2) Ohio River (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois):

THREAT: Pollution, climate change

AT RISK: Clean water for 5 million people

3) Pearl River (Mississippi):

THREAT: Dredging and dam construction

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, local and downstream communities, fish and wildlife habitat

4) Snake River (Idaho, Oregon, Washington):

THREAT: Four federal dams

AT RISK: Tribal treaty rights and culture, endangered salmon runs, rural and local communities

5) Clark Fork River (Montana):

THREAT: Pulp mill pollution

AT RISK: Public health, fish and wildlife

6) Eel River (California):

THREAT: Dams

AT RISK: Fish and wildlife, tribal culture and sustenance

7) Lehigh River (Pennsylvania):

THREAT: Poorly planned development

AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, rural and local communities, open space

8) Chilkat and Klehini rivers (Alaska):

THREAT: Mining

AT RISK: Bald eagle, fish, and wildlife habitat, tribal culture and sustenance

9) Rio Gallinas (New Mexico):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated forest and watershed management

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, farming, watershed functionality

10) Okefenokee Swamp (Georgia, Florida):

THREAT: Mining

AT RISK: Fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, water quality and flow

About American Rivers

American Rivers is championing a national effort to protect and restore all rivers, from remote mountain streams to urban waterways. Healthy rivers provide people and nature with clean, abundant water and natural habitat. For 50 years, American Rivers staff, supporters, and partners have shared a common belief: Life Depends on Rivers. For more information, please visit AmericanRivers.org