



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#5 North Fork Flathead River

Montana

Threat: Mining

SUMMARY

The Wild and Scenic North Fork of the Flathead River is a magical place of exceptional wilderness value that has seen only limited development. In the United States, the North Fork is one of the best-protected watersheds in the country. But the river remains unprotected where it originates in British Columbia, and mining and industrial coalfield development proposals threaten the entire river downstream. The U.S. State Department must keep President Obama's campaign commitment to oppose mining in the headwaters of the North Fork. The State Department must strongly urge British Columbia to extend permanent protections for the river and stop harmful mining proposals that would spoil this international treasure.

THE RIVER

One of three forks of the Flathead River, the North Fork flows 31 miles south through British Columbia before crossing into northwest Montana where it forms the western boundary of Glacier National Park. The U.S. portion of the Flathead River was designated a Wild and Scenic River in 1975, and later, in tandem with Waterton-Glacier International Park, a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. This special watershed harbors the greatest diversity of plants and animals in the Rocky Mountains and serves as the last intact wildlife corridor for grizzly bears, Canadian lynx, and wolves along the U.S.-Canada border. It also supports threatened bull trout and westslope cutthroat, some of which migrate to Canada to reproduce.

The North Fork's pristine water and wild landscape drive the local economy. More than two million visitors come to Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park each year, bringing more than 100 million dollars annually to the region. A healthy Flathead River provides drinking water, sustains local agriculture, and supports important recreational industries such as whitewater rafting and native trout fishing.

THE THREAT

Despite the high level of protection afforded to the U.S. portion of the Flathead River, its Canadian headwaters remain unprotected. Provincial environmental law provides little to

no regulatory framework for protection. In British Columbia, industries are responsible for assessing the environmental consequences of their own projects, so mining proposals come without independent analysis of environmental impacts or the cumulative impacts of multiple mining projects. Moreover, the land-use plan for the watershed places mining and energy extraction above other land-uses.

Two massive industrial energy projects threaten the North Fork: a mountaintop removal mine and a coal bed methane project. Cline Mining Corporation's Lodgepole Mine would remove a mountain-top twenty-two miles upstream of the U.S. border to obtain 40 million tons of coal. The Mist Mountain coal bed methane (CBM) project proposed by BP Energy Company of Canada would transform 50,000 acres of the Flathead headwaters into an industrial gas field.

Both the open-pit strip mines and CBM project would have direct adverse affects on water quality, fisheries, wildlife, and the overall health of the river. Critical habitat would be transformed into a maze of well pads, service roads, flaring and pumping stations, and power line corridors. Areas traditionally used for hiking, camping, fishing and rafting would be degraded or eliminated. Impacts to water quality are known to be significant and harmful, including massive increases in pollution and toxic heavy metals, such as selenium. These impacts would cascade downstream into the U.S. stretch of the North Fork and Glacier National Park. Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, both protected under the Endangered Species Act, are particularly sensitive, and the proposed mining projects would harm critical habitat. The open-pit coalmine would literally bury four miles of Foisey Creek, a key tributary to the Flathead that contains vital bull trout spawning areas.

Protection of the Flathead River is even more important as the climate changes. The watershed's exceptional species diversity and existing protected areas provide the resilience to create a 'Noah's Ark' for an assemblage of fish and wildlife found nowhere else in North America. Ensuring that the pristine Flathead watershed is not opened for harmful industrial development that impairs the ecosystem's ability to sustain its web of life is essential. The proposed CBM field and coal mine will also exacerbate climate change through the release of hundreds of millions of tons of greenhouse gases.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The U.S. Departments of State and Interior must engage Canadian leaders to implement a diplomatic solution that provides for the long-term protection of the Canadian Flathead Valley. British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell must demonstrate clear leadership in 2009 by amending the land-use policy for the Flathead to eliminate the threat of mining and energy extraction and provide lasting protection of this globally significant watershed. The amended land-use plan must place the watershed off limits to all forms of mining and energy exploration, and protect traditional recreational and wildlife values. Additionally, the provincial government should allow the proposed expansion of Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park into a portion of the Flathead River Valley. As host of the 2010 Winter Olympics, British Columbia has an opportunity to demonstrate to

the global community an enduring legacy of environmental leadership and international cooperation through the expansion of the world's first international Peace Park.

CONTACT INFO

Will Hammerquist, National Parks Conservation Association, 406-862-6722, whammerquist@npca.org

Casey Brennan, Flathead Coalition, 250-423-2603, casey@wildsight.ca

Caitlin Jennings, American Rivers, 202-347-7550, cjennings@americanrivers.org.