



American Rivers

Thriving By Nature

America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2009

#9 Pascagoula River

Mississippi

Threat: New Petroleum Storage

SUMMARY

Known as Mississippi's "Singing River," the Pascagoula flows freely through the heart of the state's ancient bottomland swamps before reaching the Gulf of Mexico in a rich network of channels and bayous. The river is an important nursery for fish and wildlife and supports a fishing industry worth hundreds of millions of dollars. But this natural treasure could be lost if the U.S. Department of Energy uses the river to hollow out natural salt domes for future storage of 160 million barrels of oil as part of a project initiated under the Bush administration. The Obama administration and key members of Congress should deny this misguided project that would waste taxpayer dollars on outdated oil infrastructure and threaten the clean water and health of the Pascagoula, and instead focus efforts on reducing the nation's dependence on oil.

THE RIVER

The Pascagoula River runs 80 miles through southeast Mississippi before forming a network of marshes and lakes that eventually flows into the Mississippi Sound. The river basin covers roughly 9,600 square miles and is one of the last large, free-flowing rivers in the lower 48. The Pascagoula provides key habitat for several species listed as threatened or endangered including the Gulf sturgeon and pearl darter. The river's estuary is an important breeding ground for many of the fish and wildlife that inhabit the Mississippi Sound and Gulf of Mexico.

The Pascagoula River is the lifeblood of local communities. Hundreds of thousands of people use this vibrant, healthy river for fishing, hunting, and recreation. The local chemical manufacturing industry depends on the river's fresh water. Marine fishing in the Mississippi Sound relies on a healthy Pascagoula River and is a major local industry. Recreational marine fishing contributes \$102 million to the state's economy each year and commercial marine fishing provides 15,000 area jobs.

THE THREAT

The Pascagoula River is threatened by an unnecessary and poorly-conceived U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) plan to expand the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), initiated under the Bush Administration. The SPR has never been filled to capacity since its creation more than thirty years ago, but in 2007, then-President Bush announced that its capacity should be more than doubled. One of the projects undertaken to help achieve this objective is known as the Richton salt domes project. This venture would squander massive quantities of taxpayer dollars on oil infrastructure at a time when we should be investing in non-polluting alternative energy sources.

The naturally-occurring Richton salt domes, located thirty miles northwest of the Pascagoula, would be gradually hollowed out to create a storage area for up to 160 million barrels of oil. Fifty million gallons of water per day would be pumped from the river over the course of five years in order to dissolve salt from the domes, nearly doubling the amount of water currently taken from the Pascagoula. The DOE estimates the project will cost approximately \$4 billion dollars to complete.

Approximately 330 miles of pipeline would have to be constructed to withdraw water from the Pascagoula, pump the salty, polluted byproduct out to a discharge location off of one of Mississippi's barrier islands, and distribute oil to and from the site.

The project seriously threatens the region's vibrant commercial and recreational fishing industry. Pascagoula-Moss Point Port, the third most productive port in the Gulf of Mexico as measured by pounds of fish, is located at the mouth of the Pascagoula River not far from the discharge point. In its Environmental Impact Statement, the DOE estimated the Richton project could affect more than 1,500 acres of wetlands, mostly as a result of the extensive pipeline system. This estimate does not include wetlands affected by reduced flows along the Pascagoula River. The DOE predicts 18 oil spills and 75 spills of salty, polluted water during the construction and initial fill of the hollowed domes, further damaging rivers, streams, and wetlands in the basin.

Community members and local and state leaders have expressed significant concerns about the proposed removal of large quantities of water from the Pascagoula, wetland impacts, and the dumping of hypersaline discharge into the Mississippi Sound. Local businesses worry about this wasteful use of limited fresh water supplies in the Pascagoula River.

With global warming already predicted to alter river flows in the Southeast, the double-blow of climatic-induced low flows and water withdrawals for the oil storage project could have disastrous effects on this fragile ecosystem. Potential consequences for the river include harm to endangered species such as the yellow-blotched map turtle, which is only found in the Pascagoula River basin. Higher salinity levels in the Mississippi Sound could kill marine grasses, small fish and shellfish and other crustaceans and would potentially harm recreational fisheries such as red drum and spotted seatrout.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

DOE is currently conducting studies in preparation for a Supplemental Environmental Impact Study (SEIS), the draft of which it expects to issue in Spring 2009. If the draft is approved, the final SEIS could be issued in September 2009 and the plan could be finalized as soon as October 2009.

Congress has appropriated \$55 million, which covers purchase of some lands for the project. Congress will only appropriate the remainder if the Obama Administration and local members of Congress support it. The Administration and Secretary of Energy Steven Chu must halt the plan's progress by not asking for funding for the Richton salt domes project in their 2010 budget request. Likewise, Representative Gene Taylor (D-MS-4th), and Senators Thad Cochran (R-MS) and Roger Wicker (R-MS) should not support further funding in 2009. Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources should hold an oversight hearing to determine whether this project is really needed.

CONTACT INFO

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