

#10 COOSA RIVER

ALABAMA

THREAT: HYDROPOWER DAMS

Summary

The Coosa River is a cultural icon of the south and home to an astounding variety of rare and unique fish and wildlife. The construction of seven large hydropower dams in the mid 1900's turned the river into a series of reservoirs and caused the largest mass extinction in U.S. history. But there is still an opportunity to save some of the Coosa's remaining natural heritage for future generations. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must meet its responsibility to insist on strong protections for the river's endangered wildlife in the license that will allow Alabama Power Company to operate these dams for the next 50 years. The Coosa will serve as a test as to whether federal agencies are committed to environmentally sustainable hydropower.

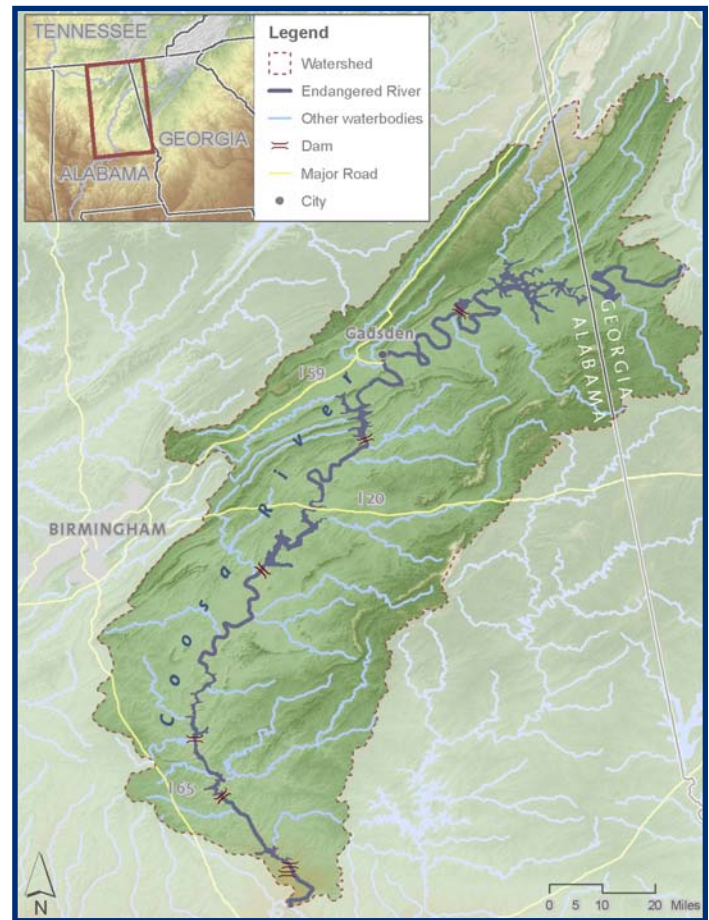
The River

The Coosa is the most developed river in Alabama, and only some of the river's 275 miles still flow freely. Most of the Coosa River is trapped behind seven Alabama Power Company dams. The river is used for recreation, drinking water, power generation, agriculture, and timber. The Coosa comprises the upper portion of the Alabama Scenic River Trail, a 631 mile paddle and powerboat trail that ends at Fort Morgan on the Gulf of Mexico. The construction of these dams doomed many of the Coosa's native fish and wildlife to extinction. Additionally, PCB and mercury contamination have spurred fish consumption advisories for much of the Coosa River and its tributaries. It is particularly important to protect what is left where we can.

The Threat

Once recognized as one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the world, the Coosa River is now fragmented by seven hydroelectric dams. It has experienced mass extinctions, and an extraordinarily high number of its fish and wildlife are listed as endangered. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) relicensing of Alabama Power's dams is the first opportunity in half a century to improve river conditions for people, fish, and wildlife, ensuring a future for 21 federally listed species in the area. Unless FERC and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service require Alabama Power Company to clean up their act, many of the listed species will likely go extinct.

FERC has refused to require Alabama Power to conduct critical studies that could lead to the recovery of imperiled fish and wildlife. Without the data these



studies could provide, FERC's finding that the project does not have a significant impact on the environment is unfounded. Furthermore, FERC's Final Environmental Assessment was nearly identical to a self-serving envi-



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ronmental assessment prepared by Alabama Power. Unfortunately, the state and federal agencies involved in the relicensing are not addressing the issue of species recovery. While their mission is “to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats”, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been extraordinarily passive in this process. In addition, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, the state agency responsible for enforcement of the Clean Water Act, issued a permit containing virtually all of Alabama Power’s proposals. Fortunately, there is still time to make a change, as FERC has yet to issue a new license for the project.

What Must Be Done

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the Coosa River’s last line of defense. Its staff will soon be given the opportunity to assess the project’s real impact on endangered species in the river. Soon, FERC will send the Fish and Wildlife Service its final analysis of the seven dams’ effect on endangered species. The Fish and Wildlife Service must either concur with FERC’s analysis or initiate its own independent review. FERC’s draft assessment

was based on an assessment prepared by Alabama Power Company and glosses over the impacts of the dams. If FERC’s review of Alabama Power’s other self-prepared documents is any indication, they will do little more than rubber stamp the latest review. The Fish and Wildlife Service must take a hard look at FERC’s assessment and initiate formal consultation to ensure protection and restoration of the Coosa River and its unique natural heritage for future generations.

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