



American Rivers
Rivers Connect Us®

**A NATION OF RIVERS:
A RIVER CONSERVATION
AGENDA FOR THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION**

NOVEMBER 2016





THE UNITED STATES IS A NATION OF RIVERS.

Almost three million miles of rivers and streams shape the landscape of our nation, providing two-thirds of the country's drinking water supply, irrigating the most productive cropland in the world, providing energy, transportation, industrial and agricultural resources that are the backbone of the American economy.

Beyond their tremendous economic value, rivers and streams provide countless opportunities for recreation, enjoyment, and spiritual renewal. In cities and towns across the country anglers, boaters, wildlife enthusiasts, and families flock to the nation's rivers and streams in ever growing numbers.

Rivers and streams are an important part of the country's rich natural heritage. Rivers and floodplains are home to the richest concentrations of wildlife in the country. America's rivers harbor a tremendous diversity of fish, from majestic salmon and trout, the basis for a multi-billion dollar sport and commercial fishing industry, to a seemingly infinite variety of darter and mussel species, many found nowhere else on earth. Rivers and riverside lands provide refuge for tens of millions of migratory birds and habitat for some of the most storied members of the American wildlife pantheon, including moose, elk, bear, wolf, and bald eagle.



Rivers are at the heart of the nation's state and federal lands — national and state parks, monuments, wilderness areas, preserves, forests and grasslands — the vast estate held for the use and enjoyment of all our people. The Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, the Rio Grande in Big Bend National Park, the Yellowstone in its namesake park, the River of Grass in the Everglades - rivers define some of our most iconic public lands.

Rivers are highways for interstate commerce, providers of energy and regional sources of water for agriculture and industry, refugia for federally protected wildlife, and the lifeblood of our public lands. Thus the federal government has a unique and vitally important role to play in the protection, restoration and management of the nation's waterways. In addition to effective implementation of federal laws and regulations that protect rivers and other waters of the United States, the arrival of a new Administration in 2017 provides an opportunity to build on past successes and launch new initiatives to conserve these vital resources.

With that in mind, American Rivers proposes the following six-point ***River Conservation Agenda for the New Administration.***

1

Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act with a bold initiative to strengthen and expand the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.



Photo: Hispanic Access Foundation

**WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS
PRESERVE OUR NATION'S
NATURAL HERITAGE**

October 2018 marks the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, arguably one of the least known and most effective federal conservation statutes. Since its inception, the Act has protected over 12,000 miles of pristine rivers and millions of acres of riverside habitat from dam construction, mining, and other threats.

While this is an accomplishment to be celebrated, that total represents a fraction of one percent of the river miles in the U.S., and many of the last wild rivers

in America remain vulnerable to damming, mining, oil and gas exploration, and other development pressures.

Moreover, many rivers that have been designated for Wild and Scenic protection are not in fact receiving the protection and management that the law mandates. In order to realize the tremendous potential of the Act and continue the legacy of river conservation established by Congress and President Lyndon Johnson 50 years ago, we urge the new Administration to:



- **Secure protection for an additional 5,000 miles of rivers through new designations and eligibility determinations.** The new Administration should lend support to several high-profile, locally-driven efforts to secure Congressional authorization of new Wild and Scenic designations already underway in Washington, Montana, Oregon and other states. In addition, the next Administration should undertake revisions to management plans for Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service lands throughout the west, ensuring that rivers flowing through those lands that are eligible for Wild and Scenic status receive the administrative protections they deserve.
- **Dedicate additional funding and personnel resources to the protection and management of Wild and Scenic rivers.** Many rivers currently designated as Wild and Scenic or recognized as eligible for such protection are not yet managed by federal land management agencies in an appropriate manner. Some lack management plans required by the Act, and others are not being effectively protected from development pressure. The Wild and Scenic Rivers System, like the national wilderness and wildlife refuge systems, deserves committed and effective stewardship. We urge the new Administration to take up this Wild and Scenic River Stewardship Challenge, to elevate the visibility of the system and improve the stewardship of Wild and Scenic rivers.
- **Establish a Wild and Scenic Rivers Center for research and development of river conservation tools.** Analogous to the highly successful Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, this new institution would promote the conservation of Wild and Scenic rivers through applied research and on-the-ground development of river conservation and management approaches.

2

Establish a Clean Water Trust Fund to finance improvements to natural and man-made infrastructure to ensure that clean water is readily available to all Americans.

Our country is facing a water quality crisis, dramatized by lead-laden water coming out of taps in Flint, Michigan, a toxic algae bloom fouling the drinking water in Toledo, Ohio, and a noxious chemical spill in West Virginia's Elk River. These are just a few recent examples of an ongoing and systemic problem.

We urge the new Administration to work with Congress to establish a Clean Water Trust Fund, funded with up to \$1 trillion over the next 25 years, that can be used to protect and restore our rivers and bring the country's water infrastructure into the 21st century.



**WATER INFRASTRUCTURE
IS VITAL TO THE HEALTH OF
OUR COMMUNITIES**

- **The Clean Water Trust Fund should finance water infrastructure** such as new wastewater treatment plants, green stormwater infrastructure, replacement of decaying and dangerously out-of-date drinking water distribution systems (such as lead pipes) and protection and



restoration of source water rivers, streams, wetlands, and recharge zones (such as upland forests). The investment in the future of America's drinking water supplies would create jobs and spur economic growth in many communities that have been hardest hit by job losses over the past decade.

- **The Clean Water Trust Fund should prioritize smart infrastructure approaches that protect, restore and replicate natural systems and use water efficiently.** These approaches have far-reaching benefits — they save money, reduce stormwater runoff and sewage overflows, recharge drinking water supplies, create appealing natural areas for community enjoyment, and help communities adapt to climate change.

3

Adopt integrated water resources management as the organizing principle for federal water management.

James River in Richmond, VA



INTEGRATED WATER
MANAGEMENT DELIVERS
**BENEFITS FOR PEOPLE AND
RIVERS**

Integrated water resources management (IWRM) is increasingly recognized as an effective adaptive framework for planning and managing water at the watershed scale. IWRM promotes community-based, stakeholder-driven processes that seek to balance water needs across all sectors and ensure that ecological sustainability is a co-equal goal over the long-term.

This shift in water management has occurred as increased water scarcity and impacts of past

development have demonstrated the need for more holistic and integrated approaches that consider the needs of both communities and the environment at the river basin scale.

- **Coordinate federal policies and programs at the national level.** While some federal agencies have explored IWRM in particular instances, in general they are unable to effectively support an integrated approach due to their history, cultures and the legislative authorities under which they operate. The new Administration should mandate coordination at the highest levels of the federal government to ensure that federal programs, within the framework of existing federal environmental laws, are coordinating, aligning and harmonizing their programs, policies and funding to better address environmental, state, tribal and local watershed needs.
- **Implement a coordinated, one-stop approach to support watershed-scale conservation efforts.** Lack of federal coordination at the national and local level often negatively impacts the ability of state, tribal and local stakeholders to effectively partner with the federal

government to execute solutions on the ground. This includes implementing projects, accessing and leveraging funding, and timely navigation of regulatory and permitting processes. The new Administration should look for opportunities to routinize federal interagency coordination through programs to directly support watershed planning efforts at the local level with coordinated delivery of technical assistance on planning, permitting, financing, information and tools. Where possible, it should implement coordination through a one-stop approach and provide targeted assistance at the local level through existing institutions.

4

Launch an “Open Rivers Initiative” to coordinate and prioritize dam removal across the country.

There are over 80,000 dams on rivers and streams across the country. Many of these provide needed irrigation, flood control, and energy production services. But many others have outlived whatever usefulness they once had, and are now often hazards to water quality, fish and wildlife, and public safety. The single most effective way to rehabilitate a damaged river system is to remove unnecessary barriers to connectivity and the free movement of water, nutrients, and wildlife.

Dam removal on Citico Creek, Tennessee



REMOVING OUTDATED DAMS CAN IMPROVE PUBLIC SAFETY

Therefore, we urge the new Administration to launch an interagency *Open Rivers Initiative* that includes the following actions:

- **Build on the outgoing Administration’s success in prioritizing and funding barrier removal to improve habitat, connectivity, water quality, and public safety.** There are currently several agencies with similar programs and objectives, but with different mandates and responsibilities in the sphere of dam removal. The incoming Administration should align these agencies — the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Highway Administration, and the U.S Army Corps of Engineers — and their programs into an interagency *Open Rivers Initiative*, maximizing the limited resources available by prioritizing and directing funds to those areas where it can do the most good, and establish barrier removal as a standard part of natural resources management across the federal family.

- **Conduct a comprehensive inventory of all taxpayer owned dams and other infrastructure.** The United States taxpayers own and operate tens of thousands of dams and accompanying infrastructure for energy production and distribution, water storage and delivery, and

flood control, and there has never been a comprehensive inventory of these facilities. This infrastructure is an enormous liability for the federal government, and ultimately, the taxpayers who pay for their upkeep, operation and mitigation, and who will be responsible for paying the price if any of them fail. The incoming Administration should conduct a full and complete inventory of all dams and infrastructure owned by the Departments of Agriculture, the Army, and Interior, including assessments of their safety, continued utility, and options for removal or modification to make them more environmentally friendly.

- **Develop a schedule for reviewing the operation plans of federal facilities.** Privately owned dams regulated by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission are required to have their operations reviewed every 30-50 years to ensure that dams are functioning properly, are in compliance with modern environmental laws, and to ensure that their impacts on the environment and public safety are properly mitigated. Federal facilities face no such scrutiny or review. The incoming Administration should develop a schedule for reviewing taxpayer owned dams and, where appropriate, consider disposing of outdated or unsafe infrastructure.
- **Develop accurate budget projections that reflect the true costs of maintaining and operating federal water infrastructure.** Dams and other freshwater infrastructure must be constantly maintained and managed. Reservoirs built in the middle of the last century are rapidly filling with sediment, reducing their function and potentially endangering public safety. Dams built decades ago may be facing such massive maintenance costs that a straightforward, science based cost/benefit analysis might lead budget managers to conclude that the taxpayers' interests are better served by removal. The failure to develop cradle-to-grave management plans for federal hydropower, flood control, and irrigation facilities masks the true cost of these facilities.
- The new Administration should conduct true cost/benefit analyses and long-term maintenance plans for federal dams. A full accounting of the cost of maintaining these facilities should include upgrades and reoperation costs to meet modern environmental standards, decommissioning, and removal. The costs of such life cycle management should be included in annual budget requests.

5

Improve protection and management of the nation's floodplains.

Floodplains, the lowlands adjacent to rivers and streams that are subject to inundation during flood events, are among the most productive wildlife habitats, the most fertile farmland, and are the areas most attractive for settlement. Uncontrolled development in floodplains across the country has led to massive losses of wetlands, immeasurable pollution and habitat destruction in the nation's rivers. Billions of dollars have been lost to flood damage and squandered on largely ineffective flood control measures. Clearly a new approach is needed. American Rivers urges the new Administration to:



Flooding in South Carolina, 2015. Photo: U.S. Coast Guard



- **Reform the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP).** The program’s artificially low rates disguise the true risks and costs of flooding, encourage risky development, and contribute to the program’s billions of dollars of debt to the U.S. taxpayers.

The new Administration should work with Congress to reform the NFIP to prioritize property acquisition and buyouts within mitigation programs, improve flood maps to include erosion hazard zones and channel migration zones, and phase out subsidized flood insurance.

- **Implement the Federal Flood Risk Management Standard.** The number of floods annually and the cost to respond to flood disasters is on the rise. The federal government needs to better protect taxpayer investments in federal infrastructure as well as public safety and river habitat. The previous Administration issued Executive Order 13690 “[e]stablishing a Federal Flood Risk Management Standard and a Process for Further Soliciting and Considering Stakeholder Input.” This executive order requires federal agencies to update their standards for federal investments when building in or affecting floodplain areas.

To date, only the Federal Emergency Management Agency has released an updated policy to implement the new Federal Flood Risk Management Standards. The new Administration must keep pressure on the agencies to update their regulations and procedures to comply with the Executive Order.

- **Direct the U.S Army Corps of Engineers and other federal agencies to prioritize nature-based approaches to flood management and disaster response.** Traditionally, the Army Corps of Engineers has favored structural solutions to managing water resources. However, nonstructural and “nature-based” approaches — restored wetlands, natural floodways and floodwater storage basins, and natural vegetation — work with natural river processes and are generally more cost-effective and sustainable than traditional structural approaches. In many cases hardened infrastructure is less resilient, less cost-effective, and less environmentally friendly than nonstructural solutions.

The new Administration should direct the Army Corps of Engineers, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service to prioritize nature-based approaches to flood management and disaster response.



Clark Fork River, MT. Photo: Kestrel Aerial Services

WE CAN **PROTECT COMMUNITIES**
BY GIVING RIVERS ROOM TO
SAFELY ACCOMMODATE
FLOOD WATERS



**HEALTHY FARMS NEED
HEALTHY RIVERS**

The interests of farmers and conservationists often converge around the issue of water. Maintaining and restoring the ecological integrity of watersheds is necessary to support drought response and long-term water security as well as to conserve healthy rivers. The health of ecosystems—such as forests, riparian habitats, wetlands and estuary and coastal habitats—is critical for managing water supplies, maintaining water quality, buffering against changes and disturbances, supporting the resilience of human and natural systems and conserving endangered aquatic species.

The new Administration should ensure that popular and well-funded Farm Bill programs make a greater contribution to river conservation and water security across the country by proactively incentivizing agricultural producers to adopt river conservation measures. We urge the new Administration to:

- **Ensure that Farm Bill conservation programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program remain well-funded and prioritize projects/practices with tangible instream benefits.** The next Administration should direct the Office of Management and Budget and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work with Congress to give priority to, and secure funding for, those Farm Bill conservation programs that provide the greatest benefit to restoring and maintaining healthy aquatic systems.
- **Engage Congress and U.S. Department of Agriculture to establish more specific regional funding opportunities in the next Farm Bill through expansion of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and Critical Conservation Areas.** Expand and scale up the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Program to provide ecological and agricultural benefits at watershed scales.

For almost 50 years, American Rivers has worked to protect healthy rivers, restore damaged rivers and conserve clean water for people and nature.

We do this because we recognize the absolutely fundamental importance of water, and the vital role that rivers play in gathering and delivering water to supply our homes, nurture our crops, and fuel our industries. We do this because healthy, resilient river systems are the first line of defense against the potentially devastating impacts of climate change. We do this because rivers run with a powerful current through the history and culture of America, and they are integral to our nation's great outdoors.

We are confident that, if adopted and implemented, the ambitious policy initiatives prescribed in this ***River Conservation Agenda for the New Administration*** will make an important contribution to securing the well-being, economic future and natural heritage of all Americans.





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ABOUT AMERICAN RIVERS

American Rivers protects wild rivers, restores damaged rivers, and conserves clean water for people and nature. Since 1973, American Rivers has protected and restored more than 150,000 miles of rivers through advocacy efforts, on-the-ground projects, and an annual America's Most Endangered Rivers® campaign. Headquartered in Washington, DC, American Rivers has offices across the country and more than 200,000 members, supporters, and volunteers.