

# #5

# Pecos River

**THREAT:** Hardrock mining

**STATE:**  
New Mexico

**AT RISK:**

Clean water, cultural values, habitat degradation, wildlife, recreation economy

**SUMMARY**

The Pecos River and its waters are considered sacred to the Pecos, Jemez and Tesuque Pueblo peoples. With its vibrant, millennia-old ties to traditional Indigenous and historic Spanish communities, the river's remarkable cultural history is integrally linked to New Mexico's identity and future.

A proposed hard rock mine could adversely impact over 5,000 acres of critical subalpine wildlife habitat and the river's life-giving clean water. Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham has publicly opposed the mine. The New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division must deny the exploratory mining application, the U.S. Forest Service must adequately assess the environmental impacts of the mining proposal, and Congress must pass legislation to permanently protect this special place for communities today and for generations to come.

PHOTO: AMIGOS BRAVOS / JIM O'DONNELL

## THE RIVER

From its headwaters in northern New Mexico, the Pecos River flows for 926 miles to Texas's Rio Grande. The entire watershed is replete with sacred sites still visited by Pecos, Jemez and Tesuque Pueblo peoples. The name "Pecos" is a Spanish derivative of the Indigenous Towa term for the Pecos Pueblo, [*p'æyok'ona*]. The Pecos was also historically referred to as the Río Natagés by the Mescalero people of southern New Mexico. Pecos Pueblo was one of the largest trade centers in the West in the 16th and 17th centuries. A landmark of New Mexico culture and tradition, today the Pecos watershed is of tremendous value to surrounding towns, tribal groups, Spanish acequia, land grant communities, ranchers, farmers, anglers, hunters and other outdoor enthusiasts.

The Pecos River encompasses a remarkable mosaic of biodiversity. Its headwaters, which begin at an elevation of over 12,000 feet, are a stronghold for New Mexico's imperiled native Rio Grande cutthroat trout. The alpine portion of the upper watershed is home to the nation's southernmost populations of ptarmigan. The lower conifer forests are a habitat for both the critically endangered Mexican spotted owl and northern goshawk and home to elk, deer, black bear, mountain lion and turkey. One of the tributaries potentially impacted by the proposed exploration supports struggling patches of the critically endangered Holy Ghost ipomopsis — a lovely flowering plant that exists nowhere else in the world and is sacred to the Jemez and Pecos peoples who use it in special spiritual ceremonies. Recognizing the many outstanding values of the Pecos, Congress added more than 40 miles of the river to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System in 1990.

The Village of Pecos and other small communities within the watershed are home to low-income Hispanic populations and other historically marginalized groups. These communities rely heavily on spending from the influx of tourists in the summer and fall coming to enjoy the Wild and Scenic Pecos River for fishing, camping, hunting and hiking. For centuries, the Pecos River has been the main source of irrigation water for traditional agricultural practices which continue to sustain many communities today.

# #5

## Pecos River

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### TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
PecosRiver2021](http://AmericanRivers.org/PecosRiver2021)

PHOTO: CAVU

## THE THREAT

Comexico LLC, a Colorado subsidiary of Australian mining company New World Resources Ltd., has acquired 20 federal mining claims for gold, copper and zinc in the Jones Hill area southwest of Tererro, New Mexico, and surrounding Santa Fe National Forest lands along the banks of the Pecos River. The company's proposed mining project could adversely impact over 5,000 acres and five of Pecos' tributaries, plus the Pecos River itself.

Since the 1800s, the Pecos River watershed has been exploited for valuable metals. From 1927 to 1939, the Tererro Mine and its mill near the Pecos River were among the most productive lead and zinc operations in the United States. A community of Pecos Pueblo people lived in the village of Pecos from the turn of the 20th century until 1938, when they decided to leave Pecos and move to Jemez because the river was too poisoned to support their

livelihoods. A nasty legacy — a massive waste pile — was left behind after the Tererro Mine closed. That waste contaminated the Pecos River, killed thousands of trout, buried Willow Creek and led federal environmental officials to recommend the area be declared a Superfund site. Fortunately, the worst of the contaminants from the Tererro Mine were contained. However, it took several environmental disasters — like heavy snowmelt in 1991 that washed pollutants into the river and caused fish kills 11 miles downstream — to make the cleanup happen. The state spent decades and millions of taxpayer dollars to clean up the Tererro Mine and the nearby El Molino Mill, where the mined rock was processed.

The river ecosystem and the cultures and communities that depend on it cannot afford this kind of risk again. Hydrologic evidence suggests that this area may also be connected to the Santa Fe River watershed and aquifer, the City of Santa Fe's primary drinking water source. The surrounding communities have fresh memories from the devastation wrought by past mining activities. This area is far more precious for its cultural, historical, economic, ecological and recreational values than for the potential short-term earnings that might be derived from destructive mineral mining.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Comexico hopes to start prospecting for gold, copper and zinc in the Tererro area as soon as it acquires the necessary exploratory permits from the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD) and receives approval from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS).

The Stop Tererro Mine Coalition, a formidable coalition of approximately thirty stakeholders, was formed by local citizens to coordinate a response to the proposed exploratory hard rock drilling. The coalition is calling on the New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division of EMNRD to deny the application for an exploratory permit under the New Mexico Mining Act. The U.S. Forest Service must also take a comprehensive and rigorous look at impacts of the mining proposal, consider a robust range of reasonable alternatives, and allow for inclusive and transparent public participation in the environmental impact evaluation.

Lastly, Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM) recently introduced the Pecos Watershed Protection Act (S.4599), which proposes to protect the entire upper Pecos watershed from future mining. Congress must pass this critical legislation to ensure this special place's long-term protection from further degradation from mining.