

Lehigh River named among America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2023

Poorly planned development threatens clean water

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Washington -- American Rivers today named Pennsylvania's Lehigh River among *America's Most Endangered Rivers*®, citing the threat that poorly planned proliferation of warehouse and distribution centers poses to river health. American Rivers and partners called on decision makers to improve protections for the river in order to safeguard clean water.

According to Lia Mastropolo, Director of Clean Water Supply at American Rivers, "The Lehigh is the backyard river for half a million people, and the keystone to Northeastern Pennsylvania's outdoor recreation industry. But unprecedented development of open space for warehousing and distribution centers now threatens the region's clean water and wildlife, and the communities and economies that rely on them."

The Lehigh Valley has become the logistics hub of the eastern seaboard, with warehouses and distribution centers already covering more than four square miles of land within the watershed. According to the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, there's roughly another square mile of development in the pipeline.

This poorly planned development threatens the Lehigh River by converting critical forest and wetlands to hard surfaces—roofs and parking lots. These impervious surfaces prevent rainwater from soaking into the ground. Instead, warm, salty, dirty water runs off the pavement directly into the river and its tributaries. This flooding and pollution, and the paving of the remaining open space in the urban stretches in the Lehigh Valley, disproportionately impact downstream communities that have already borne the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change.

"Distribution centers, in their scale and speed paving over land in the Lehigh River watershed, are permanently altering how the water flows across the landscape," said Donna Kohut of Citizens for Pennsylvania's Future. "By recognizing how these land use changes endanger the Lehigh – a river that has long suffered from harmful industry impacts – we can focus on prioritizing solutions to protect it from further degradation. We must educate local municipalities and residents about the impacts and pass statewide legislation to ensure these waterways have forested riparian buffers that protect water quality and wildlife habitat. And we must protect what is already pristine so we can invest in the downstream waters that are increasingly impaired and degraded."

American Rivers and partners called on state and federal leaders to make crucial funding and legislative decisions to protect water quality from land development throughout the watershed. This includes fully funding the Delaware River Basin Commission, which oversees water quality protections for the Lehigh and other rivers in the basin, and supporting other state and federal programs to manage development wisely.

“We’ve seen the impact that unchecked distribution center development has had on the Lehigh River valley,” said Jim Vogt of the Aquashicola/Pohopoco Watershed Conservancy. “As the industry has its sights set on cheaper land up north, we must hold strong against this tide in the upper Lehigh River watershed and protect Poconos headwaters from this same degradation.”

“Protecting all watersheds in the Poconos is critical to the economic vitality of the entire Lehigh River region”, says Rich Troscianecki, President of the Board of Directors for North Pocono CARE. “Much of this region relies on the influx of tourists to sustain the local economies. The onslaught of unchecked development will severely impact the economic vitality of the tourism in the region.”

From its headwaters in the boreal forests of the Pocono Plateau, the Lehigh River flows 109 miles to its confluence with the Delaware River in Easton, Pennsylvania. The river valley is the ancestral home of the Lenape people, and includes present-day cities of Allentown and Bethlehem. The river’s name comes from the Lenape name for the river, *Lechewuekink*, which means “where there are forks”. Part of the Lehigh River is designated as one of Pennsylvania’s Scenic Rivers, and the headwaters are designated as Exceptional Value. The river is a direct drinking water source for hundreds of thousands of people, and as a tributary to the Delaware River, supports the drinking water supply of 15 million.

The annual *America’s Most Endangered Rivers* report is a list of rivers at a crossroads, where key decisions in the coming months will determine the rivers’ fates. Over the years, the report has helped spur many successes including the removal of outdated dams, the protection of rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and the prevention of harmful development and pollution.

Other rivers in the region listed as endangered in recent years include the southern Youghiogheny River (2020) and Susquehanna River (2016).

America’s Most Endangered Rivers® of 2023

1) Colorado River, Grand Canyon (Arizona):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated water management

AT RISK: Ecosystem health, reliable water delivery, regional economy

2) Ohio River (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois):

THREAT: Pollution, climate change

AT RISK: Clean water for 5 million people

3) Pearl River (Mississippi):

THREAT: Dredging and dam construction

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, local and downstream communities, fish and wildlife habitat

4) Snake River (Idaho, Oregon, Washington):

THREAT: Four federal dams

AT RISK: Tribal treaty rights and culture, endangered salmon runs, rural and local communities

5) Clark Fork River (Montana):

THREAT: Pulp mill pollution

AT RISK: Public health, fish and wildlife

6) Eel River (California):

THREAT: Dams

AT RISK: Fish and wildlife, tribal culture and sustenance

7) Lehigh River (Pennsylvania):

THREAT: Poorly planned development

AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, rural and local communities, open space

8) Chilkat and Klehini rivers (Alaska):

THREAT: Mining

AT RISK: Bald eagle, fish, and wildlife habitat, tribal culture and sustenance

9) Rio Gallinas (New Mexico):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated forest and watershed management

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, farming, watershed functionality

10) Okefenokee Swamp (Georgia, Florida):

THREAT: Mining

AT RISK: Fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, water quality and flow

About American Rivers

American Rivers is championing a national effort to protect and restore all rivers, from remote mountain streams to urban waterways. Healthy rivers provide people and nature with clean, abundant water and natural habitat. For 50 years, American Rivers staff, supporters, and partners have shared a common belief: Life Depends on Rivers. For more information, please visit AmericanRivers.org