



5

CLARK FORK RIVER

THREAT: Pulp mill pollution

STATE: Montana

AT RISK: Public health, fish and wildlife

SUMMARY

The Clark Fork is a regional boating and angling destination and supplies some of the richest habitat in the lower 48. Throughout European settlement and industrial development, the Clark Fork was the backbone of large-scale enterprises that left a legacy of pollution and ecological damage. Community members, advocates, Tribes, and government officials are among many who have been helping to heal the river, however, the shuttered Smurfit-Stone pulp mill threatens to reverse the gains made. Sitting along four miles of the Clark Fork downstream of Missoula, Montana, Smurfit-Stone is poisoning the groundwater and river with dioxins and heavy metals. These pollutants threaten fish and wildlife and put the health of tribal subsistence fishers at risk. Through federal Superfund law, the polluters are responsible for cleaning up the site.

CLARK FORK COALITION

THE RIVER

Rising out of mountains along the Continental Divide, the Clark Fork captures water from 28,000 miles of creeks and streams on its 320-mile journey to Lake Pend Oreille. It supplies irrigation for farms and ranches throughout western Montana, and drinking water and hydropower for local communities. The river also provides food, shelter, and vital pathways for wildlife and is a popular fishery, supporting westslope cutthroat trout, threatened bull trout, and other game fish. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, whose ancestral territories span the Clark Fork watershed, have treaty rights to fish the river. The Clark Fork is a recreation destination for kayakers, rafters, and recreational floaters and the river has become the primary driver of local outdoor economies.

The Clark Fork River has faced a long legacy of industrial pollution, resulting in a complex of Superfund sites in the river's hard-working headwaters — several of which have been successfully cleaned up, including the Milltown Reservoir and Dam that was removed in 2009. Cleanup work is making headway at these sites and the river is on the mend. The lack of action at Smurfit-Stone, however, puts these gains in jeopardy.

THE THREAT

In 1957, the Smurfit-Stone mill began producing pulp products on 3,200 acres adjacent to the Clark Fork. Initially, operators discharged wastewater directly into the river causing fish kills and triggering public outcry. Later, the mill stored wastewater in unlined settling ponds. Garbage and ash went into unlined, unpermitted landfills perched on top of the aquifer. After the mill closed in 2010, EPA placed Smurfit-Stone on its inventory of Superfund sites because of the high volumes of toxic industrial chemicals.

5

CLARK FORK RIVER

Continued

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

LISA RONALD
American Rivers
(406) 317-7757
lronald@americanrivers.org

KAREN KNUDSEN
Executive Director
Clark Fork Coalition
(406) 542-0539
karen@clarkfork.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
CLARKFORKRIVER2023](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/CLARKFORKRIVER2023)



While the remaining mill buildings are set back from the river, the unlined sludge ponds and landfills are located within or adjacent to the river's historic floodplain – allowing dioxins, furans, and heavy metals like manganese to leak into the groundwater that flows to the river. Even small amounts of these toxins can cause reproductive and immune system damage in fish and wildlife, and these toxins increase as they move up the food chain. Due to human health concerns, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks issued a warning to anglers against eating any fish caught in the Clark Fork for 100 miles downstream of the mill. This legacy of pollution is in

violation of the treaty rights held by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes under the 1855 Hellgate Treaty.

Although an earthen berm separates the river from the mill, annual spring runoff and periodic flooding have eroded parts of the berm – which was never engineered or licensed as a levee. Catastrophic flooding, like the Yellowstone River experienced in summer 2022, threatens to fully erode the berm and wash tons of industrial pollutants downstream. Missoula County's floodplain regulations ban unlined ponds and improperly engineered flood control structures.

For more than a decade, the EPA has failed to adequately address these threats, and the polluters continue to resist taking responsibility for sufficient pollution testing and cleanup.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The EPA must compel the polluters, whose companies have morphed into International Paper and Westrock, to eliminate the site's immediate risk of catastrophic flooding and its ongoing release of contaminants that pollute the Clark Fork River. The place to start is by cleaning up approximately 140 acres of toxic soil and industrial waste in the unlined sludge ponds and landfills near the Clark Fork River. The EPA has authority through the Superfund process to order cleanup actions on part of a site to reduce immediate risks to human health and the environment while continuing to investigate pollution problems elsewhere at the site.

In addition to cleaning up the portion of the property that most threatens the Clark Fork River and downstream communities, the EPA must compel the polluters to undertake additional groundwater, soil, and wildlife exposure testing to better understand sources and pathways of contamination. The EPA must compel completion of tests the Missoula Water Quality District recommended in 2022.