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BLACKWATER RIVER

THREAT: Highway construction

STATES: West Virginia

AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation and tourism economy

SUMMARY

West Virginia's Blackwater River headwaters in the Canaan Valley—and Blackwater Falls State Park—are a beloved recreational and scenic treasure, and a popular destination for wildlife and nature lovers, boaters, cyclists, hikers, skiers, hunters and fishers. But the Blackwater is at risk. The current State-proposed route for a major four-lane "Corridor H" highway complex would divide local communities and cross sensitive headwater streams, destroy delicate habitat, and pollute key tributaries. Local community members and businesses are insisting that policy-makers, including the Federal Highway Administration, mandate an alternative Northern Route—one that would safeguard river health and enhance the heritage, character, and economies of local communities.

THE RIVER

The Blackwater River flows 34 miles through the High Allegheny Mountains of Tucker County, West Virginia, draining 142 square miles. Tannins from spruce and hemlock trees impart an amber color to the river as it meanders through Canaan Valley, over Blackwater Falls and into the eight-mile-long Blackwater Canyon, site of Class 4-5+ whitewater rapids. The Blackwater River region is a popular outdoor recreational resource and destination for a growing sustainable tourism economy. The Blackwater is fed by the Canaan Valley Wildlife Refuge and Big Run Bog, a National Natural Landmark. The river corridor is home to the endangered Cheat Mountain salamander, Virginia big-eared bat, northern long-eared bat and Indiana bat, the rusty patched bumble bee, and the rare West Virginia northern flying squirrel, eastern brook trout, and eastern hellbender. On the banks of the Blackwater, in the quaint towns of Davis and Thomas, locals and visitors enjoy nature and solitude. The surrounding Monongahela National Forest and the park offer a multitude of trails for all seasons.

THE THREAT

The Blackwater River is threatened by the currently State-preferred (but not yet adopted) route for a major four-lane highway that would cross all of the river's headwater streams with major construction activity at each. This route would have severe negative impacts on the area's unique cultural, historic, and environmental integrity, as well as the livelihoods of many people who live, work and recreate in the area.

A huge cement bridge and roadway complex would bisect the towns of Thomas and Davis, and another would straddle the gateway to the Blackwater Canyon, the North Fork of the Blackwater. The many rare animal and plant species in the river

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Continued



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corridor would struggle to escape the habitat destruction that comes with highway construction—including deforestation, earth disturbance, giant cuts and fills.

What's more, the currently preferred route would pass across a large former strip mine that has not been reclaimed, underlain with a honeycomb of mine tunnels that are filled with acid mine drainage pollution. Construction in this area would be a recipe for disaster for water quality and stability of structures as mine tunnels collapse and spill polluted water into the river.

Blackwater Falls State Park views would be marred by the route, and by the intrusion of truck noise and lights. The same impacts will also degrade the outdoor experience on the nearby section of the Monongahela National Forest. The famous Olson Fire Tower on the Monongahela River, which looks out over an undisturbed landscape, would become a viewing platform for tri-axle trucks and speeding cars.

Additionally, the current preferred route would degrade five major recreational cycling routes in the area. Construction on the North Fork Bridge could disrupt the Coketon area—one of the poorest communities in the county—and would shut down access to healthy recreation for the local and larger community.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

A public comment period before a final decision on a route by state and federal highway authorities will occur this year. The “Corridor H Go North Campaign” is mobilizing the voices of concerned community members everywhere to affect those authorities. Local businesses, civic and

environmental groups, and hundreds of people who appreciate the Blackwater River, are vigorously promoting a “Northern Route” alternative that would protect the Blackwater River and the people and natural systems that depend on the river.

The Campaign notes that the currently proposed route was designed 30 years ago, with little thought to preserving the Blackwater River’s unique cultural, historic, and environmental integrity. A Northern Route will maintain the river-centric regional economy while allowing highway access that meets the needs of state and federal authorities.

Please take action now to save the Blackwater and urge the State and Federal Highway Administration to mandate an alternative Northern Route.