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LITTLE PEE DEE RIVER

THREAT: Highway development

STATES: South Carolina, North Carolina

AT RISK: Clean water, wetlands, wildlife habitat

SUMMARY

The Little Pee Dee River, situated primarily in the upper coastal plain of South Carolina, is recognized as one of the Southeast's most unique blackwater rivers, holding remarkable value for people and wildlife. Along its 118-mile course are miles of forested wetlands, which provide a critical habitat for endangered species of fish and wildlife. The river has remained mostly untouched by development, but the looming threat of highway development and poor resource management puts this river, and the communities that depend on it, at risk.

THE RIVER

From its headwaters at Gum Swamp and Shoeheel Creek in North Carolina, the Little Pee Dee River flows into South Carolina at Marlboro County and continues southeast until it converges with the Great Pee Dee River at the tri-county connection with Georgetown County. The free-flowing, unaltered river system is an important resource for inland fisheries with its streams, sloughs, oxbow lakes, and cypress gum swamps, providing a diverse habitat for fish and other aquatic species. Its biodiversity includes remote swamplands that feature bald cypress forests and other hardwoods, and sandhills and bluffs that provide sanctuary to breeding and migratory waterfowl. The numerous floodplains within the watershed encompass large acreages of wild and undeveloped forestland, while wetlands connect to an abundance of creeks and streams.

THE THREAT

The construction of Interstate 73 would cross the Little Pee Dee River and run through the Little Pee Dee Heritage Preserve. This highway construction would destroy wetlands and critical wildlife habitat, impact the health of the river, and exacerbate flooding for disadvantaged communities already challenged with property damage and displacement.

I-73 would impact hundreds of acres of pristine wetlands in the watershed. Based on the submitted permit application to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 313 acres of wetlands would be impacted by just a segment of the proposed I-73. In addition, 13 perennial streams would be disturbed between the existing I-95 and South Carolina Highway 22. Numerous marginalized communities will be displaced and at-risk from the threats of exacerbated flooding and the infrastructure will hinder wildlife reproduction leading to a decline in the population of land and aquatic species.

BECKY RYON

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

DR. JANA E DAVIS

Southeast Conservation Director
American Rivers
704-285-8064
jdavis@americanrivers.org

CHERYL CAIL

Acting Chief
Waccamaw Indian People
843-358-6877
csievers.waccamaw@gmail.com

BECKY RYON

North Coast Office Director
Coastal Conservation League
843-349-4089
beckyr@scccl.org

DEBRA BUFFKIN

Executive Director
Winyah Rivers Alliance
843-349-4007
executivedirector@winyahrivers.org

DYLAN COLEMAN

Little Pee Dee Riverkeeper
Winyah Rivers Alliance,
843-289-0620
peeedeelynchespc@winyahrivers.org

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Development of I-73 will create the loss of natural habitat with the cumulative effects of ecosystem imbalances and increased flooding of the communities that live along the river.

Wetlands act as natural water filters and store floodwater that threatens the health and safety of nearby residents. Floodwater can carry raw sewage, toxic chemicals, and runoff from hazardous waste sites and factory farms. It can pollute drinking water supplies and cause numerous health conditions. When floodwaters recede, bacteria and mold may remain, increasing rates of respiratory illnesses, such as

asthma. Flooding can also contribute to mental health illnesses, lead to economic loss, and uproot whole communities. Every community deserves access to clean water and, with the destruction of wetlands from building I-73, it will impair the quality of life for thousands of South Carolinians.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

With historical land use practices already causing wetland degradation, the ruling in Sackett v. EPA has significant implications to freshwater wetlands in the Little Pee Dee River watershed, including impacts on flooding, water quality, and wildlife habitats. Despite rollbacks at the federal level, South Carolina can enact their own legislation and we must urge state legislators to establish new wetland protections. Additionally, as a home rule state, counties in South Carolina can enact ordinances above and beyond state regulations. Using the already developed Little Pee Dee Lumber Focus Area Conservation Plan, we can advocate for protection at both the state and local levels to ensure a healthy and resilient watershed.

Although I-73 is permitted and shovel ready, the state has not yet identified the \$2 billion in funding needed for construction. This year, Horry County residents will vote on a transportation sales tax which could include \$450 million for a portion of the interstate. We must remain vocal in opposition to funding this interstate and urge Horry County voters to oppose the sales tax. We must remain vocal in opposition to funding this unnecessary new interstate.