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DUCK RIVER

THREAT: Excessive water withdrawals

STATES: Tennessee

AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat

SUMMARY

The Duck River is a beautiful Tennessee waterway and the most biodiverse river in North America. The river is recognized as one of three global hot spots for fish and mussel diversity and is home to endangered fish and wildlife. Yet the Duck River is threatened by extreme development pressures from some of the fastest growing communities in the region. The river is used locally for drinking water, agriculture, and large-scale manufacturing processes, and demand for water from the Duck is rapidly outpacing what the river can sustainably provide. Overconsumption of the Duck River's water threatens its long-term use by local communities and its invaluable fish and wildlife. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee must protect this incredible waterway by convening a technical working group, directing the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to develop a comprehensive water protection plan, and funding much-needed scientific studies to understand the flow needs of the river and ensure its long-term health.

BYRON JORJORIAN

THE RIVER

The Duck River flows 269 miles through seven counties in Middle Tennessee. It is one of the top three most biodiverse rivers in the world, home to 22 aquatic snail species, 56 mussel species and 151 fish species. Many species in the Duck are federally listed as endangered or threatened, including a few whose only remaining viable populations are found in the river.

The Duck is a beloved destination for anglers, boaters, and kayakers, and serves as a backbone to the local outdoor recreation economy. Over 150,000 people recreate on the Duck River and its tributaries each year. The river is also the drinking water source for nearly 250,000 people and provides water for the region's growing population and industry.

The Duck River has long been a place of cultural import. Since time immemorial, Tribes such as the Muscogee (Creek), Yuchi, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, Shawnee, and Seneca have been its stewards and inhabitants. The Duck River Temple Mounds is one of several riverside archaeological sites, and the Duck River Cache is arguably one of the most significant collections of prehistoric Native American art discovered East of the Mississippi.

THE THREAT

Tennessee is one of the fastest growing states in the nation, and explosive growth in Middle Tennessee is having a major impact on local waterways, including and especially the Duck River. Population and industry growth has led to extreme development pressures, and local water utilities are trying to dramatically increase the amount of water they withdraw from the Duck. Unsustainable overconsumption of water from the Duck threatens to drain the river during periods of low flow and drought. This puts long-term water supply for local communities and the river's aquatic inhabitants at risk.

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DUCK RIVER

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DUCKRIVER2024

HIGHER PURSUITS

The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) has proposed to issue water withdrawal permits which would allow several local water utilities to increase the amount of water they pull from the Duck River by approximately 16 million gallons each day. Yet TDEC is in the process of issuing these permits with an inadequate plan to manage the long-term health of the river and without sufficient scientific understanding of the impact that these withdrawals will have on local habitat or threatened and endangered species. What's more, some local utilities are already claiming that the proposed withdrawal amounts are not enough, and they are advocating that TDEC allow them to pull even more water from the river.

Development pressures along with climate change-driven droughts are putting immense pressure on the Duck River and its wildlife. Even now, experts are observing mussel stranding events when there is too little water in the Duck River. These events will only become more frequent and severe if Tennessee does not proactively plan for the long-term, sustainable use of the river and continues to issue water withdrawal permits without sufficiently protective conditions.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Tennessee Governor Bill Lee must take three important actions to protect the Duck River at this critical juncture in its history. First, Governor Lee must convene a technical working group to provide expertise and recommendations regarding water management and conservation in the Duck River watershed. Second, Governor Lee must direct TDEC to develop a

comprehensive plan to proactively manage the long-term and sustainable use of the Duck River. Doing so is critical to ensure the river remains a resource for fish and aquatic life, public drinking water supply, recreation, and local industry. Finally, Governor Lee should fund much-needed scientific studies to understand the flow needs of the river. If water levels in the Duck River get too low due to short-sighted management decisions and unsustainable water withdrawals, it will hurt local economies, impede recreational use, and harm or even kill downstream species—including threatened and endangered species. These three actions are critically needed to protect the river and its world-class biodiversity, maintain a sustainable water supply for local communities, and ensure that the Duck River continues to be a waterway used and enjoyed by current and future Tennesseans.