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CLEARWATER RIVER BASIN

THREAT: Commercial logging, dredge mining, dam-building

STATES: Idaho

AT RISK: Clean water, trout and salmon

SUMMARY

The stunning Clearwater River Basin in the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest is known as a “Noah’s Ark” for Chinook salmon, steelhead, westslope cutthroat trout, and bull trout because its cold, clean, high-elevation streams will be able to sustain fish populations even as temperatures warm. The clean water that filters through the old growth forests and fills 700 miles of streams is one of the most valuable resources the Forest produces. A new land management plan that relaxes restrictions on mining and dam-building while expanding commercial logging could destroy habitat, trigger erosion, and pollute these exceptional streams. The Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest must strike a better balance to ensure that timber harvest and other activities don’t degrade clean water and other values.



JOHN WEBSTER

THE RIVER

The North, South, and Middle Forks of the Clearwater River form the Clearwater River Basin, which drains into the Snake River near Lewiston, Idaho. The North Fork provides 79 continuous miles of boatable waters and is one of the few places in the Northern Rockies where anglers can legally fish for bull trout. The South Fork provides more walk-and-wade fishing for steelhead than any other river in the region. The Lochsa and Selway Rivers form the Middle Fork and are among America’s first Wild and Scenic Rivers. They are renowned for their class IV whitewater rapids, crystal clear water, and abundant wildlife, including elk, moose, black bears, and river otters.

The Clearwater River Basin is part of the ancestral and current homelands of the Nez Perce Tribe, which spends upwards of \$2.8 million annually to restore local fish populations. In this remote part of north-central Idaho, cell service and roads are few and far between, with the exception of the Highway 12 Scenic Byway, which provides access to numerous campgrounds and river access sites along the popular Lochsa River and Middle Fork.

THE THREAT

Seven hundred miles of rivers and streams within the Clearwater River Basin and the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest are at risk from commercial logging, mining, and future dams. The Forest is planning for a four-fold increase in commercial logging and reduced protections along river corridors, endangering the clean water and trout and salmon habitat in the Lochsa River headwaters and North and South Forks of the Clearwater River. The Forest’s controversial new land management plan, released earlier this year, removes safeguards against dredge mining and dam-building, and maximizes commercial timber harvest to the

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detriment of clean water and fisheries for decades to come.

Logging, road-building, and dredge mining result in increased erosion and sedimentation, smothering aquatic insects and fish eggs with silt. Cutting down streamside trees reduces shade and increases water temperatures, which can be deadly for sensitive fish. The Lochsa and Selway Rivers are permanently protected as Wild and Scenic Rivers, meaning that mining and dams are prohibited and commercial timber harvest that harms river values is restricted within their designated corridors. Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, such as the headwaters of the Lochsa, receive

similar protections, but only temporarily. These upstream headwaters, as well as the North and South Forks of the Clearwater, have enjoyed temporary protections for nearly 30 years, until now.

In the new land management plan, the Forest stripped Wild and Scenic eligibility protections from 700 miles of rivers and the remote, wild watersheds they flow through. Prior to 2025, these rivers and their lush riparian corridors were protected from activities that would degrade vital native fish habitat, recreation, scenery, and water quality. Now, these rivers and riverside lands will be subject to extreme levels of commercial timber harvest, road-building, and extractive industry without adequate safeguards to protect their water quality and outstanding river values.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest must provide new direction on how to conduct commercial logging, dredge mining, and other extractive activities while protecting clean water and healthy fish and wildlife habitat. First, the Forest must revise its outdated Comprehensive River Management Plan for the Wild and Scenic designated Lochsa, Selway, and Middle Fork Clearwater Rivers to provide guidance on how to design projects to ensure protection of the values for which these rivers have been protected since 1968. Those values include scenery, recreation, and old-growth forests whose cold, clear waters are home to Chinook salmon, steelhead, bull trout, and westslope cutthroat trout. Second, for the 700 miles of rivers that it is no longer “Wild and Scenic eligible” under its new land management plan, the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest must issue a forest plan amendment to provide project-level guidance that formally documents how other plan components will protect these rivers from the harmful effects of unsustainable logging, dam-building, and dredge mining.