

Embargoed: April 16th 2025

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American Rivers Names Gauley River to America's Most Endangered Rivers® of 2025, Due to Toxic Coal Mining Pollution

4/16/2025 Washington D.C. — The threat of toxic pollution from coal strip mining in the headwaters of one of the Gauley's primary tributaries—the Cherry River—has made it one of America's Most Endangered Rivers® of 2025. In Greenbrier and Pocahontas counties in West Virginia, South Fork Coal Company operates a network of strip mines, haul roads, and a coal preparation plant spanning over 3,600 acres. These mines have violated water pollution standards at least 80 documented times since 2019, releasing sediment and toxic heavy metals—at times exceeding legal limits by more than 900 percent—into the river.

In recent years, the company has trucked about 100,000 tons of coal on average annually through the Monongahela National Forest (known locally as “the Mon”) — an activity that violates federal prohibitions against mining activity within the national forest. Were it not for this unlawful coal-hauling activity, South Fork Coal Company would not be able to operate the more than 1,100-acre Rocky Run Surface Mine, a key source of the company's chronic water pollution issues.

“This is a severe abuse of the public trust. It simply isn't fair for one company not to play by the rules and to profit at the expense of West Virginians' water, outdoor heritage and wildlife habitat,” **said David Moryc, senior director of river protection for American Rivers.** “Local communities are paying the price for mining practices that are flaunting basic safeguards to protect West Virginians and the economically vital Gauley River. “

“For four years, this company has illegally operated within the Monongahela National Forest,” **said Willie Dodson, coal impacts program manager at Appalachian Voices.** “Now, having just declared bankruptcy, South Fork Coal is asking regulators to retroactively validate this activity. It's unacceptable. If they get away with it, I shudder to think what the next encroachment by the coal industry into our public land will be. Are they going to strip Spruce Knob? Are they going to put a sludge dam at Cranberry Glades? This is the time to draw a line in the sand.”

The Gauley supports an outdoor-recreation economy that generates hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The Cherry River and other Gauley headwater streams lie largely within the Monongahela National Forest, home to old-growth stands and an extraordinary array of wildlife, from the rare northern flying squirrel and the eastern hellbender salamander to the brilliantly hued endangered candy darter.

“I grew up in the Mon,” **said Olivia Miller, program director for the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy.** “I know firsthand that our public lands are a foundation of a way of life here in West Virginia. They preserve traditions like hunting and fishing that have been passed down through generations and draw people from across the country to experience our rivers — especially the Gauley, which is a cornerstone of our outdoor recreation economy. That economy depends on healthy forests and clean water, and we cannot let South Fork Coal Company

destroy the very places that make it possible. We have a responsibility to protect the Gauley and the lands that sustain it, not just for ourselves, but for every generation that follows.”

The Trump administration has called for opening up federal lands to fossil fuel extraction. Right now, South Fork Coal Company is appealing to the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement for a determination of “valid existing rights,” the legal term for an exception to the well-established ban against most mining activity within the national forest.

“This scheme to retroactively bless illegal coal hauling strikes at the very heart of our laws protecting public lands,” **said Andrew Young, staff attorney for the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance.** “If South Fork Coal Company can ignore decades of legal safeguards and then receive a ‘get-out-of-jail-free’ card, no corner of the Monongahela National Forest, or any national forest, is truly safe. We cannot allow a bankrupt strip mining company to profit by trampling on the public trust. The law is clear, and we owe it to future generations to defend our forest, our waters, and our communities from these brazen violations.”

South Fork Coal Company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in February 2025, but this does not relieve this company from the restrictions of law, nor does it absolve regulators of their enforcement responsibilities.

American Rivers and our partners Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, Appalachian Voices, and West Virginia Highlands Conservancy are calling on the federal Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement to reject South Fork Coal Company’s bid for a determination of “valid existing rights.”

[Learn more](#) about America’s Most Endangered Rivers 2025, including other rivers and the selection process.

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American Rivers is a national conservation organization working to make every river clean and healthy for people and wildlife. We combine evidence-based solutions with enduring partnerships to safeguard the 3.5 million miles of rivers and streams that are essential to our nation’s clean drinking water, extraordinary wildlife, and strength of our communities. For more than 50 years, our staff, supporters, and partners have been driven by a common belief: Life Depends on Rivers. AmericanRivers.org

The Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance (ABRA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting the environmental integrity of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge region and the surrounding Central Appalachian Highlands of Virginia and West Virginia. In 2020, following the defeat of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, ABRA launched the Conservation Hub to support informed public engagement on broader environmental challenges. The Hub builds on ABRA’s Pipeline CSI project by providing GIS mapping, regulatory documents, and assessments to promote responsible resource management. ABRA collaborates with partners to develop multiple Conservation Hub sites, inviting conservation groups, individuals, and communities to propose new initiatives. abralliance.org

Founded in 1967, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy is one of the state’s oldest environmental advocacy organizations. Over the decades, it has led successful campaigns to protect some of the state’s most treasured natural areas, including Dolly Sods, Otter Creek, and Canaan Valley. The Conservancy champions responsible stewardship through

advocacy, education, and collaboration—publishing resources such as the *Hiking Guide to the Monongahela National Forest* and its monthly newspaper, *The Highlands Voice*. From helping to establish wilderness areas to confronting destructive mountaintop removal mining, the Conservancy remains a leader in safeguarding West Virginia's wild landscapes for current and future generations. Learn more at wvhighlands.org

Appalachian Voices is a leading nonprofit advocate for a healthy environment and just economy in the Appalachian region. We bring people together to protect the land, air, water, and communities of Central and Southern Appalachia and build a clean energy economy. appvoices.org