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# PASSAIC RIVER

**THREAT: Industrial Pollution**

**STATES:** New Jersey, New York

**AT RISK:** Water quality, public health and safety

## SUMMARY

The Passaic River has always been a vital resource, supporting livelihoods and economic growth. But it has also been badly contaminated by the chemical manufacturing industry. Thanks to the work of many committed people, there is now a plan in place to clean up the contamination and begin to restore the river. We recognize the decades of effort that brought us here and urge the federal government to help see this cleanup through to completion — restoring fisheries, boosting tourism and recreation, creating jobs, and improving public health. At the same time, we urge local residents to get to know the river and help shape the restoration. A cleaner Passaic River means a stronger economy and a healthier future for New Jersey's communities.

## THE RIVER

From its headwaters in Morris County, New Jersey, the Passaic River flows approximately 80 miles through a landscape of contrasts. Its uppermost reaches are located in the Highlands, which is largely rural and protected from development. The river continues its flow through a patchwork of wetlands and suburbs, joining with the Rockaway and Pompton Rivers before entering the dense urban landscapes of Paterson and Newark, and finally completes its journey at Newark Bay.

As both a resource and a means of transport, the river has supported the region's economic development, allowing large manufacturing companies to grow and prosper on its banks. Its watershed is home to ten reservoirs and three drinking water facilities that serve more than two million people. Its publicly-accessible parks and natural areas serve over two and a half million people residing in its watershed. Since pre-colonial times, the Passaic River was a vital resource to the Mohican and Munsee-Lenape people who settled in the region.

## THE THREAT

The Lower Passaic River was designated as a Superfund site in 1984, owing to nearly two centuries of pollution by heavy industry and manufacturing along the river. From America's earliest textile mills, to the chemical manufacturers of DDT and Agent Orange to name a few, companies have used the river for waste disposal and economic gain. This has resulted in an accumulation of toxic waste that includes heavy metals, Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), and very high concentrations of dioxins in the riverbed sediments in the river's tidal zone below Dundee Dam. The worst of this pollution is located in the lowermost eight miles, from Belleville, New Jersey to Newark Bay.

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# PASSAIC RIVER

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## TAKE ACTION:

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PASSAICRIVER2025](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/PASSAICRIVER2025)



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Many of the companies responsible for the pollution have agreed to fund a substantial portion of the cleanup effort, which is estimated to cost in total as much as \$1.8 billion. In 2022 – nearly 40 years after the site was added to the Superfund list – a group of 85 responsible polluters entered into an agreement with the US Environmental Protection Agency to pay \$150 million toward the cleanup of both the upper and lower portions of the river. But how the additional costs will be paid, and by whom, is still being negotiated.

Thanks to committed people working through a robust system of environmental laws, a safe,

toxin-free Passaic is on the horizon. As remediation and restoration work begins, it is vital that the momentum continues. The federal government has done much to move this cleanup forward over the past 40 years, and now more than ever must continue to make it a priority. Federal leadership, combined with engagement by local communities and contributions from the private sector, can pave the way towards a brighter future for the Passaic River.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

To restore the Passaic River to its full potential, contamination must be fully remediated as quickly and efficiently as possible. That will involve addressing dioxins, PCBs, sewage, and other contaminants in the full length of the Lower Passaic River. But the work must not stop there. We envision a future where the Passaic River is not only toxin-free, but healthy and enjoyable for the people who live along it.

First, we ask the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 2 Office to maintain its commitment to the people of New Jersey and ensure that the cleanup continues to be a top priority. This means continued support of the experienced federal staff working to advance the cleanup, as well as maintaining proactive oversight of the Superfund legal process to ensure participation by all responsible parties.

Second, we celebrate the many years of hard work by advocates such as the Ironbound Community Corporation, the NY/NJ Baykeeper, the Trust for Public Land, the Great Swamp Watershed Association, the Passaic River Community Advisory Group, and others. Together these organizations and individuals have successfully mobilized the Passaic River cleanup to be poised for action. Looking forward, we call on all those who care about environmental health, flooding, and access to safe outdoor spaces and clean waters to join these advocates in shaping the Passaic River restoration.