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National Rivers Group Names Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint Rivers as America's #1 "Most Endangered"

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TALLAHASSEE -- The national group American Rivers today announced its list of *America's Most Endangered Rivers*®, naming the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin in Alabama, Florida and Georgia as the Most Endangered in the country. Outdated water management decisions and spiraling demand have put the basin at a breaking point.

The *America's Most Endangered Rivers*® report is a list of rivers at a crossroads, where key decisions in the coming months will determine the rivers' fates. Rivers are chosen for the list based on the following criteria: 1) The magnitude of the threat, 2) A critical decision-point in the coming year and 3) The significance of the river to people and nature.

The water conflict that has gripped the region for almost three decades has come to a head with Florida's U.S. Supreme Court suit against Georgia and the latest attempt by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to update its protocols for managing the basin. Apalachicola Bay, which once produced 90 percent of Florida's oysters, collapsed in 2012 due to inadequate fresh water flows. Some Florida fishing families have had to move away to find work. The Corps manages the rivers to allow extensive upstream withdrawals for drinking water, hydropower, flood control and fish and wildlife conservation. Other uses include industrial development and agriculture primarily regulated by the states of Alabama, Florida and Georgia.

"The Apalachicola River may be the most important river in the United States that most Americans are not familiar with," said Senator Bob Graham. "The Apalachicola played a significant role in the history of the south and nourishes the Apalachicola Bay, one of the world's most productive estuaries. This estuary, and the special economy and way of life that it supports, is dependent upon a sustained flow of fresh water from the River mixing with the salt waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Tragically, in recent years, the mismanagement of the Apalachicola-Flint-Chattahoochee Basin has led to the collapse of this vital environmental and economic resource.

American Rivers is an important advocate for the role that rivers play in the ecological diversity of America. The Apalachicola River could not be a more appropriate choice on which to focus the nation's attention on the need to protect America's rivers."

"We hope this designation serves as a wake-up call and will bring the actions and change in direction needed to recover the Apalachicola River and Bay System before it goes beyond the tipping point of irreversible loss," said Apalachicola Riverkeeper Dan Tonsmeire. "We have a chance to turn this around. If we act together, we can recover the ecological functions of the Apalachicola without compromising Georgia's water supply."

"The first key to all this is that the Corps of Engineers needs new marching orders," said Shannon Hartsfield, a fourth generation fisherman and president of the Franklin County Seafood Workers Association. "The ecological needs of Apalachicola Bay should be on an equal footing with the other competing water users further north. We are hopeful that the State of Georgia will do their part to help us too. If we don't redirect the Corps of Engineers on this, we're done for. Our next drought will be the end of this bay."

The rivers in the basin are so heavily exploited that some run at drought flows even in normal water years. These river conditions are not historically the case; it's happening because Georgia water use has skyrocketed and the Corps is releasing less and less water downstream. In droughts, some tributary streams are completely dry, and many of the Apalachicola's bottomland side streams and sloughs run dry for months at a time.

"If sufficient freshwater flows aren't restored soon, the once-thriving Apalachicola Bay could be lost forever," said U.S. Senator Bill Nelson.

American Rivers and partner organizations are calling on the governors of Alabama, Florida and Georgia to swiftly form a transparent water-sharing agreement that protects the rivers. We are also calling on the Corps to significantly improve water management to sustain river health.

"It's time to move from water conflict to a new era of cooperation," said Ben Emanuel of American Rivers. "This basin is ground zero for water management challenges, but it is also fertile ground for new and sustainable water management solutions. This *Most Endangered River* listing is a call to action."

Jason Ulseth of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper in Georgia added: "While the metro Atlanta region has made significant strides in water conservation, we are far from reaching our true conservation potential. All river users must pursue aggressive water conservation measures to ensure that we are using these precious water resources as wisely as possible."

Gordon Rogers, of Flint Riverkeeper, warned that "litigation and political campaigning are the least effective ways to manage water so that it is sustainable for future generations."

"After experiencing the decline of so many amazing river systems like those of the Chesapeake Bay, Everglades and Colorado River," Rogers said, "we have to be smart enough not to repeat the same mistakes. The three states and the Corps must use the best available science and stakeholder involvement to resolve this issue. The citizens of the ACF basin have already provided solutions for this regional problem. The Corps, the Governors and Congress should take a signal from the citizens, and work together to solve the problem."

Mitch Reid, program director for Alabama Rivers Alliance, said the national Most Endangered Rivers designation "emphasizes the critical need for Alabama to complete the development of a sustainable Alabama Water Plan."

"Further," Reid said, "we must truly engage our neighbors to protect our shared water resources."

Collin O'Mara, President and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation, added: "The Apalachicola River is an American treasure that is slowly dying from a lack of fresh water. As a nation, we must do what is necessary to restore the system to health and we urge the Obama Administration to implement common-sense solutions that send more water downstream."

Over the years, the America's Most Endangered Rivers report has helped spur many successes, including removing outdated dams, protecting rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and preventing harmful development and pollution.

America's Most Endangered Rivers® of 2016:

#1: Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Basin
(Alabama, Florida, Georgia)
Threat: Outdated water management

#2: San Joaquin River
(California)
Threat: Outdated water management

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#3: Susquehanna River
(Pennsylvania, Maryland)
Threat: Harmful dam operations

#4: Smith River
(Montana)
Threat: Mining

#5: Green-Duwamish River
(Washington)
Threat: Outdated water management

#6: Pee Dee River
(North Carolina)
Threat: Harmful dam operations

#7: Russell Fork River
(Virginia, Kentucky)
Threat: Mountaintop removal mining

#8: Merrimack River
(New Hampshire, Massachusetts)
Threat: Polluted runoff

#9: St. Lawrence River
(New York)
Threat: Harmful dam operations

#10: Pascagoula River
(Mississippi, Alabama)
Threat: New dams

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