



The Enterprise

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White Salmon River named to 'endangered' list

Story by: Jesse Burkhardt

American Rivers, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental organization, has released its annual list of "America's 10 most endangered rivers," and the White Salmon River is number five on the list.

According to information posted on the American Rivers Web site, every year the organization solicits nominations from thousands of river groups, environmental organizations, outdoor clubs, local government agencies, and taxpayer watchdog groups, and then creates the list.

"The report highlights the rivers facing the most uncertain futures, rather than those suffering from the worst chronic problems," reads a portion of an April 17 press release explaining why and how the rivers on the list were chosen. "For almost a century, Condit Dam has cut off salmon and steelhead from an important Columbia River tributary."

The dam is cited as the key reason why the White Salmon River is on the list.

Amy Kober, Northwest Communications director for the Seattle office of American Rivers, said the report shines a spotlight on the White Salmon River.

"I want to emphasize that this is not a list of the worst rivers. The White Salmon is a treasure of a river. This is a huge opportunity we have -- that's why we want to highlight this river."

The three key criteria for deciding which rivers are at risk include: the magnitude of the threat to the river; the regional and national significance of the river; and whether a major decision point is coming within a year.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) is expected to rule sometime in 2007 whether to permit the decommissioning and removal of Condit Dam, which is at White Salmon River milepost 3.3.

"The ruling is definitely going to be this year," Kober said. "Maybe in the fall. There is a meeting of the FERC commissioners in September."

PacifiCorp, a Portland utility that owns Condit Dam, has signed an agreement that calls for removal of the dam -- which produces a modest amount of hydro-electric power -- in late 2008. The permitting process that will allow for the dam's removal is still under way.

"The list is a big educational tool. It shines the spotlight on critical decisions, and gets the decision-makers to do the right thing," Kober explained. "People from all across the nation can weigh in on this. That will put the focus on FERC to issue an order that honors the settlement agreement and keeps renewal on track for 2008."

"Restoring the sacred salmon to the White Salmon River has long been a goal of the Yakama Nation," said Sam Jim, Sr., Fish & Wildlife Committee chair of the Yakama Nation Tribal Council. "Working in partnership with PacifiCorp and our other partners will once again allow us all to witness the salmon's cycle of life, which nourishes the watershed and our people."

Trout Lake resident Pat Arnold, who is a member of the group Friends of the White Salmon, said the river is at a crossroads -- facing either further decline or being restored to a healthy system.

"Friends of the White Salmon is a signatory to the settlement agreement for dam removal," Arnold said. "We've worked on this issue a long time. It's not a simple issue, not black or white or right or wrong -- but the potential for seeing salmon restoration is inspiring. We're just one dam away from the Pacific. There is the potential for a big impact, with relatively little cost."

"This is the type of river that can capture peoples' imagination. It's an inspiring story, to see a river come back to life," Kober added.

The other rivers on the endangered list for 2007 include: the Santa Fe River in New Mexico; San Mateo Creek in California; the Iowa River in Iowa; the Upper Delaware River in New York; the Kinnickinnic River in Wisconsin; the Neuse River in North Carolina; Lee Creek in Arkansas; and the Chuitna River in Alaska.

The organization has released the "endangered rivers" list since 1986.

"I think the White Salmon River is a gem. Elsewhere in the state, rivers are in trouble. We have a river that is beautiful and unspoiled, and I hope the listing help keeps the river that way. It is a true community asset," Arnold said.