

Overtaxed Colorado tops endangered rivers list

DEAR EARTHTALK: Why was the Colorado River named the most endangered river of 2013?

— Missy Perkins,
Jenkintown, Pa.

American Rivers, a leading nonprofit dedicated to the conservation of rivers and riparian corridors across the U.S., recently unveiled its annual list of the nation's most endangered

rivers. The mighty Colorado earned the No. 1 spot, thanks mostly to outdated water management practices in the face of growing demand and persistent drought.

"This year's America's Most Endangered Rivers report underscores the problems that arise for communities and the environment when we drain too much water out of rivers," says American Rivers' president Bob Irvin. "The Colorado River ... is so over-tapped that it dries up to a trickle before reaching the sea."

Indeed, 36 million of us drink water from the Colorado. The river responsible for cutting the Grand Canyon irrigates nearly four million acres of farmland where some 15 percent of the

nation's crops are grown.

But according to American Rivers, over-allocation and drought have placed significant stress on water supplies and river health—and another summer drought is on the way. A 2013 study by the federal Bureau of Reclamation finds that there isn't enough water in the Colorado to meet current demands and that the flow will be as much as 30 percent less by 2050 due to climate change. That reduced flow threatens not only endangered fish and wildlife but also the river system's \$26 billion recreation economy.

"We simply cannot continue with status quo water management," says Irvin. "It is time for stakeholders across the Colorado Basin to come together around solutions to ensure reliable water supplies and a healthy river for future generations." *TOO MANY PEOPLE!*

American Rivers has gathered dozens of community groups and other partners together to urge Congress to allot significant funds for river clean-up, state-of-the-art water conservation techniques in cities and on farms, and water sharing mechanisms that allow communities to adapt to warmer temperatures and more erratic precipitation as global



THE COLORADO RIVER, which irrigates nearly four million acres of farmland, earned the No. 1 spot this year on American Rivers' America's Most Endangered Rivers list. Here it is cutting through the Grand Canyon, but the river is so over-tapped that it now dries to a trickle before it reaches the sea. (Photo by iStockPhoto)

warming takes effect.

Individuals can do their part by conserving water and spreading the word among friends and neighbors. Another way to help is to send a letter to Congress via American Rivers' website outlining why instituting better water management practices up and down the Colorado is important to all Americans. Meanwhile, National Geographic's Change the Course campaign challenges everyday

Americans to pledge to shrink their "water footprint." For every pledge received, corporate sponsors donate funds that partnering organizations then use for ecological restoration and other projects that return water to the river.

The Colorado is far from the only U.S. river in trouble. The runner-up on American Rivers' 2013 list is Georgia's Flint River, where excessive agricultural and municipal demands are taking

too much water out. The story is similar for several other rivers on the list: Texas' San Saba, Wisconsin's Little Plover, and the Catawba in North and South Carolina.

"The annual 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," reports the group. "Over the years, the report has helped spur many successes including the removal of outdated dams, the protection of rivers with Wild and Scenic designations, and the prevention of harmful development and pollution."

The group hopes that all the attention it is showering on the Colorado this year will help turn it into another American conservation success story.

CONTACTS: American Rivers, www.americanrivers.org; Change the Course, www.changethecourse.us.

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