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One river: less endangered now?

Before BC Environment Minister Barry Penner effectively pulled the plug on a private company plan to build a series of hydro-power installations along creeks that feed into the Upper Pitt River and a transmission line through a provincial park, the BC Recreation Council had labelled the river (40 kilometres from Vancouver) BC's most endangered river. The March 26 cancellation of the powerline followed a meeting in Mission, packed with 1,000 people opposed to the run-of-river power project.

'The clustering of power projects along the Upper Pitt has raised serious concerns about the potential for adverse impacts to the river and its fish stocks,' said Mark Angelo, Rivers Chair for the Outdoor Recreation Council and an Order of Canada and Order of BC recipient. 'The potential negative impacts of this project on the Upper Pitt have also raised broader concerns that existing government review processes are not adequately distinguishing between those projects that may be appropriate and those that are clearly not,' he claims. 'The Upper Pitt is a jewel amongst BC's many spectacular waterways and, given its great ecological values, the river and its major tributaries should be protected from such a development,' added Angelo, who also heads BCIT's Fish and Wildlife Program.

Following the Minister's transmission line cancellation, the Outdoor Recreation Council's list may need revision, only days after it was published on March 24. The two rivers tied for second place, the Flathead and Fraser, may move up the list.

The Flathead River, which topped last year's list, flows through southeastern BC into Montana. The Flathead is widely considered one of North America's wildest and most beautiful waterways. The river supports important trans-boundary fish populations while also sustaining perhaps the highest density of inland grizzly bears anywhere in North America, along with many other wildlife species.

Yet, while the US section is protected, the BC stretch faces a number of threats, the most prominent being the proposed Cline open pit coal mine. Given the size and location of the mine in the river's headwaters, water quality would be impacted and recreational, wildlife and wilderness values would be greatly compromised. For these reasons, the public's response during the review process has been overwhelmingly against the mine. Other threats to the river include coalbed methane development, roads and pipelines. 'No other region

along the Canada/US border sustains such a diversity of wildlife and ecosystems,' notes Angelo, 'and while mining is a major industry in our province, many British Columbians also believe that there are places with exceptional values that are just not appropriate to mine—and the Flathead River is one of them.'

The Fraser River for the 15th time in 16 years makes the top five endangered rivers in BC. 'Of particular concern this year are the development pressures facing the 'Heart of the Fraser' between Hope and Mission, one of the most productive sections of river anywhere in the world,' added Angelo.

Taking the third spot this year is the Taku River, a renowned wilderness river that faces the imminent prospect of a controversial mining development. In the number four spot is the Peace River, marking its first appearance on the list in many years as a result of renewed interest in the 'Site C' dam proposal.

In the fifth position is a unique listing that actually combines the headwaters of Skeena, Stikine and Nass, three of Canada's most important salmon rivers. Widely known to first nations as the 'sacred headwaters,' this area is the site of a major proposal by Royal Dutch Shell to extract coalbed methane gas, a highly invasive process that many believe would compromise the biological richness of the great rivers that flow from this area.

'The problems outlined in this year's list are extensive and diverse, ranging from controversial dam proposals and low summer flows to the need for improved riparian protection and better collaborative planning,' explains Angelo. 'These issues highlight the fact that you cannot separate the health of our fish stocks from the health of our rivers; they are completely interdependent. Yet, while the waterways on this year's list face many habitat-related problems, things can still be turned around if there is a strong enough will to do so.'

Each year, the Outdoor Recreation Council solicits nominations for BC's Most Endangered Rivers from its member groups, which total 120,000 members, as well as from the general public and resource managers from across the province. Submissions are reviewed by a panel of some of BC's best-known river conservationists.

For more information on the threats to—and possible solutions for—BC's rivers, please go to www.orcbc.ca.

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