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Rio Gallinas Named aMong America's Most Endangered Rivers of 2023

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American Rivers has named the Rio Gallinas among *America's Most Endangered Rivers*®, most notably for the consequences of the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire and associated outdated agency protocols for forest management, prescribed burning, and watershed management. These factors pose serious threats to local drinking water, traditional acequia agriculture, and long-term watershed health. The Rio Gallinas flows through New Mexico from the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and provides water to the town of Las Vegas, NM. It is a vital tributary to the Pecos River and is home to a rich array of wildlife and supports both recreational and traditional uses.

“The Rio Gallinas faces numerous threats, including drought, reduced snowpack, and the myriad consequences from the fire. If we want to heal the Rio Gallinas and protect it in the future, the state and federal agencies must develop a long-term management approach that is community-driven, locally appropriate, and includes nature-based solutions,” said American Rivers Associate Director of the Southwest River Protection Program, Rachel Ellis.

New Mexico's waterways are among the most vulnerable in the United State and the Rio Gallinas is a textbook case for the adverse impacts of climate

change on Southwestern watersheds. “Without a strong connection to its floodplain and with a loss of wetlands, the Rio Gallinas is experiencing a deficiency in natural water storage that mitigates floods and helps maintain flows during drought” states Lea Knutson of Hermit’s Peak Watershed Alliance. “Drinking water, farming, fish, wildlife, and overall watershed functions are at risk.”

The river has been devastated in the aftermath of the largest fire in New Mexico history, the Hermit’s Peak/Calf Canyon fire. In 2022, this fire devastated 341,735 acres, including a majority of the upper Rio Gallinas watershed. The fire was sparked by two United States Forest Service prescribed burns that merged. The final report cited the destruction of over 900 structures, including 300 homes and multiple acequias. The fire and ensuing floods contaminated water sources watershed-wide and resulted in drinking water emergencies and mandatory water cuts. The surrounding communities and environment will continue to experience long-term impacts from flooding, water quality degradation, loss of vegetation, and decreased soil stability because of the Hermit’s Peak/Calf Canyon fire.

“The fire last year was catastrophic, and we can’t afford to have something like this happen again,” said Max Trujillo. Trujillo, a San Miguel County Commissioner and senior New Mexico Field Coordinator for HECHO, continued, “we need our federal and state agencies to establish stronger policies and protocols for engaging with the local community around watershed management and prescribed burning.”

Modernizing forest management policies and protocols is essential to improving watershed health. The lack of government agency collaboration and community engagement are hindering efforts to save the Rio Gallinas. Federal and state agencies, including the Santa Fe National Forest, Army Corps of Engineers, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department (EMNRD) Forestry Division, and New Mexico Environment Department are being asked to come together with the local community and local watershed organizations for the first annual New Mexico Fire and Water Summit in the Summer of 2023. The goal of the Summit is to create a long-term management and mitigation plan for the Rio Gallinas watershed.

“The Rio Gallinas and the acequias and communities that depend on it are resilient. But if we want the Gallinas to continue providing for us, our children, and our grandchildren we must collaborate in a manner that benefits the entire Rio Gallinas watershed,” said William Gonzales of the Rio Gallinas Acequia Association and New Mexico Acequia Commission.

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. 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.

Other rivers in the region listed as Most Endangered in past years include the Colorado River (2022), Pecos River (2021), and Gila River (2019).

America’s Most Endangered Rivers® of 2023

1. Colorado River, Grand Canyon (Arizona):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated water management
AT RISK: Ecosystem health, reliable water delivery, regional economy

2. Ohio River (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois):

THREAT: Pollution, climate change
AT RISK: Clean water for 5 million people

3. Pearl River (Mississippi):

THREAT: Dredging and dam construction
AT RISK: Clean drinking water, local and downstream communities, fish and wildlife habitat

4. Snake River (Idaho, Oregon, Washington):

THREAT: Four federal dams
AT RISK: Tribal treaty rights and culture, endangered salmon runs, rural and local communities

5. Clark Fork River (Montana):

THREAT: Pulp mill pollution
AT RISK: Public health, fish and wildlife

6. Eel River (California):

THREAT: Dams
AT RISK: Fish and wildlife, tribal culture and sustenance

7. Lehigh River (Pennsylvania):

THREAT: Poorly planned development
AT RISK: Clean water, fish and wildlife habitat, rural and local communities, open space

8. Chilkat and Klehini rivers (Alaska):

THREAT: Mining
AT RISK: Bald eagle, fish, and wildlife habitat, tribal culture and sustenance

9. Rio Gallinas (New Mexico):

THREAT: Climate change, outdated forest and watershed management

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, farming, watershed functionality

10. Okefenokee Swamp (Georgia, Florida):

THREAT: Mining

AT RISK: Fish and wildlife habitat, wetlands, water quality and flow

About American Rivers

American Rivers is championing a national effort to protect and restore all rivers, from remote mountain streams to urban waterways. Healthy rivers provide people and nature with clean, abundant water and natural habitat. For 50 years, American Rivers staff, supporters, and partners have shared a common belief: Life Depends on Rivers. For more information, please visit [AmericanRivers.org](https://www.americanrivers.org)



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