

**American Rivers • High Country Citizens' Alliance
Land and Water Fund of the Rockies • Trout Unlimited**

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Colorado's Gunnison River "Most Endangered"
Black Canyon National Park jeopardized by water rights giveaway

Gunnison River #4 on annual list released today – www.americanrivers.org

(Washington, DC) American Rivers today named the Gunnison River as one of the nation's Most Endangered Rivers for 2003, citing a federal water rights giveaway that opens the door for massive new water diversions from the river. The Gunnison River is at the #4 spot on this year's list, which was released by American Rivers and dozens of national, regional, and local groups at events across the country.

Finalized for release on April 10, the America's Most Endangered Rivers report warns of an impending water rights giveaway. On April 2, the Department of the Interior beat conservationists to the punch – announcing that it has agreed to the state of Colorado's demands to reduce the federal claim to water flow for the Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park in western Colorado. The decision, which sacrifices the ecological integrity of the Black Canyon National Park to provide water for sprawl development on Colorado's Front Range, will be challenged by environmental groups in court.

"The Department of the Interior folded like a cheap umbrella in a strong wind," said Rebecca R. Wodder, president of American Rivers. "It is sacrificing the roar of the Gunnison River through the Black Canyon for the roar of traffic through the Front Range."

The Gunnison River's signature feature is the Black Canyon National Park, but the federal government proposed last week to minimize the park's water right. Although the park and the Gunnison River have already been damaged by irrigation withdrawals and dam releases that maximize hydropower generation, the Interior Department chose to open the door for substantial new water withdrawals.

The Black Canyon National Park's federal reserved water right dates back to 1933, when President Hoover first acted to protect the canyon. Interior Department officials have indicated that they will claim much less water than the park is entitled to and will subordinate the park's water rights claim to irrigators and municipalities with more junior rights. This is the first step for municipalities outside of Denver to purchase as much as 240,000 acre feet of Gunnison River water for delivery across the Continental Divide to fuel sprawl development.

"Under the arrangement announced by the Bush administration, huge quantities of water that could be used to restore and permanently protect the ecology of the Black Canyon could instead end up on blue grass lawns on the Front Range. Despite how the administration and the state of Colorado are trying to portray their agreement, it is in no way a fair deal for the Black Canyon," said Drew Peternell with Trout Unlimited.

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Warning that this case is an important precedent, conservation groups are planning legal challenges to the decision. The outcome of the Black Canyon National Park water rights proceedings will set precedent for dozens of national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and Indian reservations in the West with reserved rights that have yet to be quantified.

“The Department of the Interior must not sacrifice the Park’s water rights based on speculative future uses by others,” said Bart Miller with the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies.

“It appears that the federal government has put Front Range growth ahead of the scientifically proven needs of the park and endangered fish downstream. All of this even when it is known that conservation measures could provide for enough water for the Front Range,” said Wendy McDermott with High Country Citizens’ Alliance. “The settlement for a minimum flow of 300cfs is just devastating. The needs of the park and endangered fish downstream are being jeopardized. This outcome is just wrong. It is a step towards opening the doors for trans-basin water diversions to Colorado’s Front Range.”

Across the nation: Water waste and watershed destruction compound drought

The water shortages confronting the Gunnison River are sadly not unique. In a special chapter of this year’s report, American Rivers explored how the destructive combination of rising water demands and the destruction of wetlands and other freshwater habitats threatens the nation with a future where many rivers regularly run dry. To prevent this, the group called for the establishment of an “ecological reserve” of protected river flows. More specific recommendations included helping farmers acquire modern irrigation equipment that require less water to grow more crops and employing “smart growth” strategies to curb sprawl and protect wetlands and streams from development.

“Saving rivers is not just about keeping pollution out of the water anymore,” Wodder said. “More and more we have to fight to keep water in the river, at all.”

About America’s Most Endangered Rivers

Each year, American Rivers solicits nominations from thousands of river groups, environmental organizations, outdoor clubs, and taxpayer watchdogs for the *America’s Most Endangered Rivers* report. The report highlights the rivers facing the most urgent and imminent threats. It is not a list of the nation’s most chronically polluted rivers. The report presents alternatives to proposal that would damage rivers, identifies those who will make the crucial decisions, and points out opportunities for the public to take action on behalf of each listed river.

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