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South Fork Salmon River

PHOTO: DANIEL PATRINELLIS



SOUTH FORK SALMON RIVER, IDAHO

State: Idaho

Threat: Mining

At Risk: Clean water; endangered species; recreation; wilderness

Summary

The South Fork of the Salmon River is a major tributary to the beloved Wild and Scenic Salmon River—the second longest free-flowing river in the lower 48 states. The South Fork provides habitat for threatened and endangered fish and some of the state's best expert-level whitewater. A Canadian mining company's proposal for a massive open pit gold and antimony mine in the river's headwaters threatens to pollute this Idaho treasure, adversely impacting all the downstream communities and tribal nations that rely on it for jobs, economic livelihood and cultural heritage. The U.S. Forest Service must protect the South Fork of the Salmon, the Wild and Scenic Salmon River and endangered fish by denying this mining proposal.

The River

The South Fork of the Salmon River headwaters flow from high in the Salmon River Mountains east of Cascade, Idaho. This river, found to be Wild and Scenic eligible and suitable by the U.S. Forest Service, travels for approximately 86 miles north to where it meets the Salmon River at Mackay Bar. The Shoshone Bannock, Shoshone Paiute and Nez Perce tribes have used the river for fishing and hunting since time immemorial.

The South Fork of the Salmon River is home to westslope cutthroat trout and is designated as critical habitat for endangered chinook salmon, steelhead and threatened bull trout. The South Fork Salmon watershed is the cornerstone in ongoing efforts to restore endangered salmon and steelhead to Idaho.

A long history of extensive logging, road building and mining have taken a toll on the river's health. Despite this legacy, the South Fork Salmon is on the mend. It boasts clear, free-flowing waters and undisturbed spawning habitat for migratory fish populations. The river is a magnet for expert whitewater paddlers from around the world and supports a thriving recreation economy in central Idaho.

The Threat

The demand for Idaho's precious gems and metals continues to threaten the state's public lands and rivers. At the headwaters of the South Fork Salmon is an old open-pit mine called Stibnite. Reclamation of the site has been under way since the mid-1990's. Federal, state and tribal agencies have spent millions of dollars cleaning up the mess left by previous mining companies.

Midas Gold Corp., a company based in Vancouver, Canada, has submitted a proposal to the U.S. Forest Service to reopen the mine. The proposal includes expanding two existing open pits and digging a third to extract gold and antimony. Ore will be processed on site and waste deposited into a 450-acre tailings storage facility that will be built on top of undisturbed bull trout habitat in Meadow Creek,

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Take Action:

[www.AmericanRivers.org/
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a major tributary of the river. The 400-foot tall dam constraining the tailings will be constructed of waste rock from the mining operation. Other waste rock dumps will bury smaller undisturbed tributaries hundreds of feet deep.

Mining began at Stibnite in the late 1800s. Since that time, elevated levels of arsenic, mercury and antimony are present in the tributaries surrounding Stibnite. A recent study by the U.S. Geological Survey indicates that concentrations of these metals are declining. Reopening and expanding the mine will destroy any previous work done to restore the health of the river's ecosystem.

Mining operations are inherently toxic for water quality and the environment. The scale at which this project is proposed could have catastrophic repercussions for the South Fork of the Salmon River and downstream communities that depend upon a healthy Salmon River ecosystem.

What Must Be Done

In July 2017, the Payette National Forest completed a public scoping process and received hundreds of comments opposing the mine from people who would be directly and negatively impacted by its operations, including business owners, campers, hunters, anglers, rafters, kayakers and others. Since that time, a coalition of local residents and South Fork enthusiasts have come together to fight the mine. The Nez Perce Tribe has formally opposed Midas Gold's mining operation, which lies within their 1855 treaty territory, arguing that a project of this scale is too high risk for the health of the watershed. The town of McCall, Idaho, recently declined to join a community partnership with Midas Gold, citing overwhelming opposition by its residents, though many other rural communities are still being actively courted by Midas. Stopping the development of this mine will take a significant effort.

In August 2019, the Payette National Forest will release a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on Midas Gold's proposed project, followed by a public comment period. The U.S. Forest Service must protect the health of, and investment in, the South Fork of the Salmon River, the water quality of the Wild and Scenic Salmon River, and the long-term recovery of endangered fish by prohibiting the reopening and expansion of the Stibnite Mine.

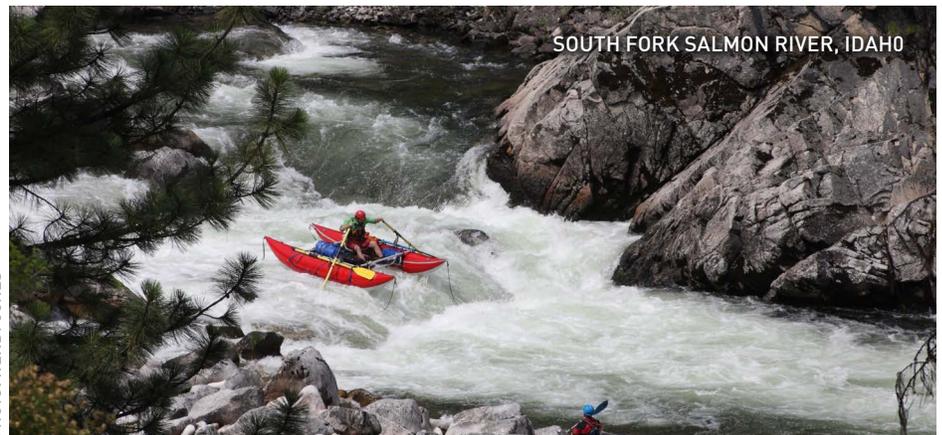


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