**Ocklawaha River named among America’s Most Endangered Rivers of 2020**

*Rodman Dam threatens clean water and habitat for fish and manatees*

April 14, 2020

Contact: Erin McCombs, American Rivers, 828-649-7887

Lisa Rinaman, St. Johns Riverkeeper, 904-509-3260

Captain Erika Ritter, A Cruising Down the River, 352-299-0282

Washington, D.C. –American Rivers today named the Ocklawaha River among *America’s Most Endangered Rivers®*, citing the Rodman Dam as a threat to clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreation.

“America’s Most Endangered Rivers is a call to restore rivers for today’s communities and future generations,” said Erin McCombs with American Rivers. “The Ocklawaha River is a Florida treasure, but this obsolete dam is holding back the river’s full potential to revitalize local communities and a healthy environment. Governor DeSantis has a historic opportunity to bring the river back to life.”

In 1968, the natural connection of the Ocklawaha River to the St. Johns River was severed by the Rodman Dam, part of the Cross Florida Barge Canal that was never built. The dam flooded over 7,500 acres of forested wetlands, 20 springs and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River. It also caused significant harm to threatened and endangered species, adjacent wetlands and forests, 12 miles of downstream river and wetlands, and the St. Johns River. While the reservoir behind the dam, Rodman Pool, became a popular bass fishing destination, the pool has never functioned as a natural lake and must be artificially maintained and drained every three to four years to kill nuisance aquatic vegetation with herbicides. In addition, fish diversity and quantity have declined due to water quality degradation and loss of floodplain habitat.

Governor DeSantis has demonstrated his commitment to the improvement of Florida’s water resources by dedicating millions of dollars to support Everglades restoration. Lending his support in Northeast Florida for Ocklawaha River restoration is essential to the economy and health of three outstanding rivers and one of the state’s largest first magnitude springs.

“Reconnecting and restoring the St. Johns, Ocklawaha and Silver Springs by breaching the Rodman Dam offers a much-needed stimulus project that provides jobs, increases visitor traffic and restores three of Florida’s most loved waterways creating an unprecedented environmental and economic lift to Northeast Florida during a critical point in our history,” said Lisa Rinaman with St. Johns Riverkeeper.

“There is no other river in America quite like the Ocklawaha River,” said river Captain Erika Ritter. “Restoration will bring back our native fish like the striped bass, provide habitat for threatened manatees, save the cypress forest and restore a lost blueway for motorboats and paddlers from the Atlantic Ocean to the Harris Chain of Lakes.” As a young child, Ritter saw the “crusher crawler” machine destroy part of the large cypress forest near her river home.

The 74-mile river rises from the swamps and lakes of north-central Florida, winds along the Ocala National Forest, connects with the spring-fed Silver River and travels east near Orange Springs before reaching the St. Johns River, an American Heritage River. The Timucua people inhabited the region centuries ago, and in more recent times the Creek, Choctaw and several other tribes displaced from their lands by European settlers formed the Seminole nation on the banks of the Ocklawaha. Much of the river remains largely undisturbed, providing natural landscapes of hydric hammocks, long leafed and slash pine, and the sugar sandy soils that give Florida its white sand beaches. The fossil remains of paleo-mammals like mastodons and saber-toothed tigers are often found near the river.

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 Okefenokee/ St Marys River (2020), St. Johns River (2008), Apalachicola River (2016, 2002, 2000 & 1997), Peace River (2004), Caloosahatchee River (2006) and the Chattahoochee River (2016, 2012, 2000, 1998, & 1996).

**AMERICA’S MOST ENDANGERED RIVERS® OF 2020**

**#1 Upper Mississippi River (**Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin)

**Threat:** Climate change, poor flood management

**#2 Lower Missouri River (**Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas)

**Threat:** Climate change, poor flood management

**#3 Big Sunflower River (**Mississippi)

**Threat:** Yazoo pumps project

**#4: Puyallup River (**Washington)

**Threat:** Electron Dam

**#5: South Fork Salmon River (**Idaho)

**Threat:** Gold mine

**#6: Menominee River (**Michigan, Wisconsin)

**Threat:** Open pit sulfide mining

**#7: Rapid Creek (**South Dakota)

**Threat:** Gold mining

**#8: Okefenokee Swamp (**Georgia, Florida)

**Threat:** Titanium mining

**#9: Ocklawaha River (**Florida)

**Threat:** Rodman Dam

**#10: Lower Youghiogheny River (**Pennsylvania)

**Threat:** Natural gas development

**River of the Year: Delaware River** (Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware)

Honored as a national success story for restoration and a model for equitable and innovative clean water solutions.

**The Many Voices of the Ocklawaha River**

**Free the Ocklawaha Coalition:** *“Thirty-three organizations representing millions of supporters have pulled together to make restoration a reality as we move towards the 50th anniversary of the halting of the Cross Florida Barge Canal. The Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam, never used for its intended purpose, is past its life expectancy. It is time to come together for the benefit of the economy and the environment.”* - Margaret Hankinson Spontak, Chair, Free the Ocklawaha Coalition.

**Dam History:** *“It was my grandmother who rallied 162 scientists in 1970 to convince President Nixon to stop the canal that was one third completed. As founding President of Florida Defenders of the Environment (FDE), she worked for 30 years to reconnect three rivers that were severed by the Rodman Dam. As current President of FDE my goal is to restore the Ocklawaha River with aligned stakeholders to protect wildlife and the environment through building an understanding of the interconnectedness of rivers, forests, animals, people and wellbeing.”* - Jennifer Carr, FDE President and Biosecurity Research & Extension lab manager at UF Entomology & Nematology Dept.

**Economic and Environmental Impact:** *“The recent Ocklawaha River drawdown gave us a glimpse of what the river once was and could be again. At a time when Florida’s water issues are at the forefront, restoring this special part of wild Florida makes ecological and economic sense.”* - Julie Wraithmell, Executive Director, Audubon Florida

**Fish:***“Silver Springs will never be fully restored without the removal of the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam on the Ocklawaha River. Migratory fish from the Atlantic Ocean and St. Johns River, including striped bass, channel catfish, striped mullet, American shad, American eels, and Atlantic sturgeon, are critical to a productive Silver Springs ecosystem. Large schools of catfish and mullet, swimming over algae-free grasses, will provide a visible confirmation of restoration for the public riding the iconic Glass Bottom Boats at Silver Springs.”-* Dr. Robert Knight, Executive Director, Florida Springs Institute.

**Manatees:** “*We can address the greatest long-term threat to Florida’s manatees — loss of warm water habitat to survive during cold weather – by restoring natural flow of the Ocklawaha River and its 20 freshwater springs. Restoration would provide vital winter refuge to an estimated 1,000 manatees that shelter at impermanent power plants.” -* Elizabeth Fleming, Senior Florida Representative, Defenders of Wildlife.

**Recreation Use: “***A University of Florida study on the Ocklawaha River, not including Silver Springs State Park, confirmed that ‘the economic impact from eco-tourists who use the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River is twice that of the anglers and boaters at Rodman Reservoir.’ Use of the reservoir sites has been declining since records began in 2004. Returning the historic fish and attracting hundreds of manatees to Silver Springs will boost visitor counts and revitalize the Silver Springs community.”* - Chris Spontak, President, Silver Springs Alliance.

**Tourism:** “*The Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam eliminated 16 miles of the natural Ocklawaha River. My boat passengers want to see a healthy, natural waterway and the creatures that inhabit them. The dam has created an unreliable recreational resource that is often impassable by boat due to invasive aquatic plants.”-* Karen Chadwick, River Guide, NorthStar Charters

**Water:** *“Ocklawaha River restoration would increase freshwater flows in the Lower Ocklawaha and St. John Rivers by millions of gallons a day due to less evaporation off the artificial pool and uncovering of more than 20 springs flooded by the Rodman Dam.”* - James Gross, geologist and Executive Director of Florida Defenders of the Environment.

**Wildlife:** *“On behalf of hikers, paddlers and conservationists, the Sierra Club is committed to restoration of the natural flow of the Ocklawaha. In the words of Whitey Markle “the poor old Ocklawaha’ is due the attention it has deserved and has been left without for far too long.”* - Cris Costello, Organizing Manager, Sierra Club