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# South Fork Salmon River

**STATES:** Idaho

**THREAT:** Mining

**AT RISK:** Clean water, threatened fish, recreation

## SUMMARY

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



PHOTO: ZACHARY COLLIER

## THE RIVER

The South Fork Salmon River originates high in the Salmon River Mountains east of Cascade, Idaho. This river, deemed Wild and Scenic eligible and suitable by the U.S. Forest Service, travels approximately 86 miles north to meet 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 Salmon River is home to native westslope cutthroat trout and is a critical habitat for threatened chinook salmon, steelhead and bull trout. The South Fork Salmon watershed is a 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. The river is a magnet for expert whitewater paddlers from around the world and supports a thriving recreation economy in central Idaho. The Nez Perce Tribe has invested years of effort and millions of dollars in restoring salmon and steelhead in the watershed.

## 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 underway since the mid-1990s. Federal, state and tribal entities have spent millions of dollars cleaning up the mess left when previous mining companies walked away.

Midas Gold Corporation, a company based in Vancouver, Canada, has submitted a proposal to the U.S. Forest Service to reopen and greatly expand 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 will be deposited into a 450-acre tailings storage facility built on top of undisturbed bull trout habitat in Meadow Creek, a major tributary of the river. The 400-foot-tall dam constraining

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## South Fork Salmon River

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

#### SCOTT BOSSE

American Rivers  
(406) 570-0455  
[sbosse@americanrivers.org](mailto:sbosse@americanrivers.org)

#### NIC NELSON

Idaho Rivers United  
(208) 343-7481  
[nic@idahorivers.org](mailto:nic@idahorivers.org)

#### EVAN STAFFORD

American Whitewater  
(970) 420-5377  
[evan@americanwhitewater.org](mailto:evan@americanwhitewater.org)

#### FRED CORIELL

Save the South Fork Salmon  
(208) 315-3630  
[savethesouthfork@gmail.com](mailto:savethesouthfork@gmail.com)

### TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
Salmon2020](https://www.AmericanRivers.org/Salmon2020)



PHOTO: PAM BOND

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 have been present in the surrounding tributaries. 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 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 and kayakers. Since that time, a community-based organization of local residents and South Fork enthusiasts, called Save the South Fork Salmon, has formed to fight the mine.

The Nez Perce Tribe has formally opposed Midas Gold's mining operation, which lies within the tribe's 1855 treaty territory, arguing that a project of this scale is too high risk for the health of the watershed. The Nez Perce Tribe is currently suing Midas Gold for violation of the Clean Water Act. The town of McCall and the Valley County Commission recently declined to join a community partnership with Midas Gold, citing overwhelming opposition by local residents. However, Midas is still actively courting many other rural communities.

Furthermore, six members of Congress who serve on the House Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations recently launched an inquiry into undue influence on the U.S. Forest Service's permitting process by Midas Gold's lawyers and lobbyists.

Stopping the development of this mine will take a significant effort. In spring 2020, the Payette National Forest will release a draft environmental impact statement 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 Salmon River, the water quality of the Wild and Scenic Salmon River, and the long-term recovery of federally listed fish by prohibiting the reopening and expansion of the Stibnite Mine.

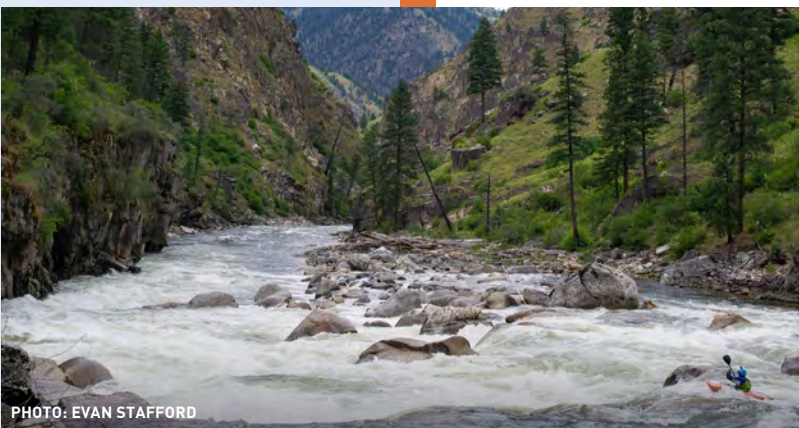


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