

Drill plans land Hoback River on imperiled list

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Gas drilling plans have landed two rivers on an annual list of the 10 most imperiled U.S. streams, including western Wyoming's wild and woolly Hoback River, where the drilling is proposed at the headwaters.

The Susquehanna River, which runs through New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland, topped the list released Tuesday due to new drilling in that region. The Hoback came in at No. 7.

The Washington, D.C.-based conservation group American Rivers issues the list every year to call attention to impending or developing environmental issues. "We really try to highlight rivers at a crossroads or at a tipping point that will be facing big decisions in the coming year," group spokeswoman Amy Kober said. "It's a powerful tool. We've seen some great victories over the years."

The list changes from year to year, and isn't intended to highlight which rivers already are the most polluted or damaged, she said.

Other Wyoming rivers that made the list in recent years included the Platte River system in 2003 and Powder River in 2001. The group listed the Platte due to water diversion for irrigation, and the Powder for coal-bed methane development. A proposal by Houston-based Plains Exploration and Production to drill 137 gas wells from 17 pads got the Hoback listed this year. Even before the list came out, the Eagle Prospect-Noble Basin project drew attention.

The project was the subject of contentious public meetings in western Wyoming last winter. Bridger-Teton National Forest received some 60,000 written public comments on the draft environmental impact statement it released for the project. Forest employees are reviewing the comments before working on a final plan for the PXP project. Few, if any, projects in Wyoming forests have drawn so much attention, said forest spokeswoman Mary Cernicek.

Most comments opposed drilling, she said, though many were form responses of the type that environmental groups often encourage people to submit. PXP didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Drilling opponents said they hoped the listing would help their cause.

"It's a beautiful river," said Dan Bailey, who owns property along the Hoback. "It's a

great fishery for the native cutthroat trout, and to expose a river that is as natural as this one is to that threat, I think, would just be a huge mistake."

The listing reinforces concerns about the project raised by the group Citizens for the Wyoming Range, said member Dan Smitherman. "They have a good, moderate reputation and having them say the same things we've been saying is just great," he said.

Hydrocarbons spilled on the ground could enter the river, he said, but it's possible that polluted groundwater could find its way into the waters.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency also has raised concerns about the project, questioning whether the plan would go far enough to protect groundwater. A deal announced in December between PXP and two groups, the Wyoming Outfitters and Guides Association and the group Wyoming Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, would retire 28,000 of the company's 64,000 acres of oil and gas leases in the area while moving the proposed locations of two well pads away from the Hoback. The company also would allocate \$6 million over the life of the project for things such as air and water quality monitoring.

American Rivers this year listed rivers in 14 states and nearly every region. The group said mining threatens the rivers feeding Alaska's Bristol Bay, which ranked second on the list, and Virginia's Roanoke River, which ranked third. Sewage pollution ranks the Chicago River in Illinois fourth, while plans for hydroelectric dams have ranked California's Yuba River fifth.

Rounding out the list: the Green River in Washington state, sixth; Black Warrior River in Alabama, eighth; St. Croix River of Wisconsin and Minnesota, ninth; and Missouri's Ozark National Scenic Riverways, 10th.