

Guest opinion:

State action protects one of our finest rivers

By Tim Palmer

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On Dec. 7, the Oregon Water Resources Commission voted to “reserve” the waters of the North Fork Smith River and its tributaries in Curry County for fish, wildlife, recreation, livestock and domestic water use. Mining is absent from this list.

The designation is a milestone for those who value our rivers and the best of Oregon’s natural places. Everybody wins, except perhaps the faceless corporations that have proposed to strip mine for low-grade nickel at the headwaters of this national treasure house of pure water, salmon habitat, botanical wonders and stunningly beautiful wilderness.

The commission sets policy for use and control of the state’s water resources. Anyone wanting a major withdrawal is now on notice: That will not be allowed if it would impair the North Fork’s pristine quality and habitat.

The new mandate reinforces the ruling of a sister agency, the Oregon Environmental Quality Commission, which in July 2017 named the North Fork as “Outstanding Resource Waters.” Under this classification, pollution must be strictly regulated to maintain the highest level of water quality.

Both state-level initiatives serve to protect this extraordinary area from the ravages of poorly regulated mining, and both bolster earlier decisions by the federal Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service in 2016 to temporarily bar new mining claims in a smaller specified area of the North Fork and adjacent watersheds.

Taken together, all these measures to protect Oregon’s North Fork Smith and its tributaries are testament to both the extraordinary natural values of this place and the public support voiced in opposition to strip mining from this and nearby land.

Local advocates have long argued for protection of waterways that rise in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and flow not only into the Smith but also to Rough and Ready Creek and then the Illinois and Rogue rivers, and to both Pistol River and Hunter Creek, which riffle directly into the Pacific. Few streams in America compare for clarity. All these southwestern Oregon rivers are critical to the survival of our iconic runs of salmon and steelhead. The mountain slopes and wetlands feeding into these waterways are a virtual outdoor museum of rare plants not found elsewhere. Downstream, the Smith and other waterways are crucial to domestic supplies for residents and towns as large as Crescent City, California.

Southwestern Oregon deserves a better fate than that of wastelands found elsewhere in the West where the Environmental Protection Agency lists metals mining as the leading cause of toxic pollution.

The Water Resources Commission reaffirmed what hundreds of southwestern Oregon residents overwhelmingly said at hearings about the mining proposals and also about the water quality protections: our rivers are the foundation of life and economy in Oregon. It's good to know, now, that our state agencies agree, because the ability of the federal government to protect its citizens from the hazards of unwanted pollution is in doubt with the Trump administration's dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency and its abandonment of other measures designed to protect everybody's air and water.

While the new classification applies only to the Smith's North Fork basin in Curry County, the assets, conditions and threats at play there are virtually

identical for all the surrounding streams. There, too, the clean water, fish, wildlife habitat and drinking supplies are more important than any prospect for strip mining.

Oregon has acted to protect one our finest rivers. The others nearby deserve the same respect, care and stewardship.

— *Tim Palmer of Port Orford is the author of "Wild and Scenic Rivers: An American Legacy," and "Rivers of Oregon," "Field Guide to Oregon Rivers" and other books.*

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