
New report highlights most ecologically important rivers to protect in Oregon

August 29, 2021



Oregon's rivers are crucial to supporting biodiversity and providing ecosystem services like clean drinking water and recreation opportunities, offering significant value to people, wildlife, and ecosystems. Yet these rivers are under increasing threat as the climate warms and our populations grow, which place greater stress and demand on freshwater resources.

Despite their importance, few rivers and streams are currently protected from human impacts to their integrity and flow. Today, we have the opportunity to conserve more of these waterways in Oregon and across the United States through a variety of mechanisms.

A new, peer-reviewed report by scientists at Conservation Science Partners (CSP) provides a rigorous assessment of Oregon's rivers that are currently unprotected, and through the application of multiple ecological criteria, identifies those rivers with exceptional ecological value that are candidates for protection through state Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRW) designation or state or federal Wild and Scenic

River (W&S) protection. CSP examined 54,115 miles of Oregon's rivers currently lacking any conservation designation that also met criteria for protections under state law. They determined that rivers and streams that met the most criteria for protection were found in the western half of the state, although high value rivers were also found in the Blue and Wallowa mountains in the northeast. Stretches of the Owyhee, Donner und Blitzen, and South Fork John Day River, also met the criteria for protection.

"This research is significant because it is the first comprehensive measurement of the Oregon rivers and streams with the greatest potential for state or federal protection," said chief scientist Brett Dickson. "We found that tens of thousands of river miles across the state contain a vast range of ecological values and ecosystem services worthy of protection. Using the newest data and latest tools, we were able to identify the 'best of the best' river segments and key places to conserve."

The research noted that 5,784 river miles are within the ranges of at least 30 aquatic Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), and nearly 42,000 miles are within the ranges of at least 20 of these at-risk species. CSP scientists cited the Chetco River watershed as "extraordinary," for containing the largest number of river miles with high ONRW potential as well as the most total miles with high W&S potential.

"Today, the state of Oregon has only about 2% of its river miles protected under state or federal designations," said Nicole Cordan, a project director at The Pew Charitable Trusts, which commissioned the study. "We hope this research will help guide lawmakers, policymakers, and other stakeholders as they strive to determine priorities for protection of Oregon's waterways for future generations to use and enjoy."

View the report at https://www.csp-inc.org/public/OR_StateOfRivers_FinalReport_07272021.pdf

Conservation Science Partners conducted similar assessments on rivers and waterways in California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Washington.