

Wilderness group lists top 10 endangered California wildlands

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SACRAMENTO – In remote northwestern California, where the Salmon River flows into the Klamath on its way to the Pacific, the Karuk tribe gathers each year for a world renewal ceremony at what its culture holds to be the center of the universe.

The rivers, subject to ongoing battles between tribes, farmers and fishermen over too-scarce water, are the most threatened wild places in Northern California on the top 10 list released Tuesday by the California Wilderness Coalition. The Oakland-based nonprofit has compiled the list the last four years based on a survey of other environmental groups, scientists and experts.

The Klamath River was on last year's list, but the tributary Salmon River watershed is among four new danger zones this year because of the potential for logging, mining and new roads there.

Roads are also the concern in the desert Mojave National Preserve, where San Bernardino County has 2,500 miles of highway claims under the Bush administration's interpretation of a 1866 federal mining law. County officials say they do not expect to exercise most of the claims.

Temporary roads – the kinds made by trespassing snowmobiles in winter – are the concern in the Hoover Wilderness Additions bordering Yosemite National Park. The U.S. Forest Service has managed the area as unofficial wilderness since 1986, but is proposing to open 7,000 acres to snowmobiling where there already is heavy, if illegal, use each winter.

And in the Owens Valley Wildlands, made famous when Owens Lake was siphoned off to slake Los Angeles' thirst nearly a century ago, remnant meadows and wetlands are threatened again, the group says.

"This is sort of 'phase two.' The whole 'Chinatown' issue of taking the surface water there, we're all kind of familiar with," said Ryan Henson, the coalition's policy director, referring to the 1974 Jack Nicholson film. "Now, because of the groundwater pumping there, the wetlands are drying up."

Dropped from this year's list are the development of Tejon Ranch, where owners are in negotiations; the Golden Trout Wilderness Addition area, where the Forest Service withdrew its logging proposal; and logging and energy development proposals for the Giant Sequoia National Monument and Medicine Lake Highlands, both stalled by court challenges.

Five other sites return from last year:

–National forests in the northern Sierra Nevada and southern Cascade ranges, where the group opposes a sweeping management plan they say will boost logging.

–The Furnace Creek area in the White Mountains, east of the Sierra Nevada, which the group says is a rare desert stream threatened by illegal off-road vehicle trails.

–Algodones Sand Dunes, where off-road traffic threatens endangered wildlife and wilderness.

–The Cleveland National Forest, where freeways, dams, and power lines threaten the region's last unprotected wild forests.

–The eastern portion of the Los Padres National Forest, where the Forest Service is studying the potential for oil and gas development as required by a 1987 law.

"This may be the year when the Los Padres goes off the list, because they're going to make their decision in May," Henson said.

The Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations lamented the danger to salmon populations as outlined in the report's warnings on the Klamath and Salmon rivers. Damage to populations there two years ago are severely restricting salmon fishing along the California and Oregon coasts this year.

The Karuk, California's second-largest tribe, said damage to the rivers amounts to a desecration of their sacred sites as well.

They call the confluence of the two rivers "Katimin," the heart of the universe, and gather there to symbolically remake the world for each new year as they have "since time immemorial," said Leaf Hillman, the tribe's vice chairman. "We gather to pray for all people and things that make up this world, for their health and their success. For Christians, (damaging the river) would be like bulldozing the birthplace of Christ."

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