

River makes at-risk listing

WATER LEVEL PLAN: Advocacy group says IJC must choose B+

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The St. Lawrence River was named as one of America's 10 most endangered rivers Wednesday by American Rivers, a national river advocacy group.

The 35-year-old group chose the St. Lawrence not based on its pollution level, but on the threats it faces, said spokesman Garret M. Russo.

"The St. Lawrence River is at a crossroads. I would hope that the International Joint Commission would listen to the voices of the thousands, if not millions, of people in support of plan B+," Mr. Russo said.

According to a press release from American Rivers, the group receives thousands of submissions from environmental organizations, local governments and watchdog groups for their annual America's Most Endangered Rivers report. The group then chooses 10 rivers facing the most uncertain futures.

Mr. Russo said the St. Lawrence River, at No. 4 on the list, is at a particularly important stage as the IJC prepares to select a water-level plan to replace the 50-year-old plan now in place. He noted there is a proposal to protect the river environment that is widely supported by the people and local government.

"Protecting the river is a contact sport. People need to get involved," he said.

The International Joint Commission has been widely criticized by state, federal and local officials since it announced last month that it is considering a close cousin of its current regulation. The newly proposed plan, Plan 2007, is similar to the current water management plan, 1958-D, which keeps the water level high during the summer and cuts it sharply in the fall.

The commission is set to make a decision by the end of the year to implement a plan that manages water levels along Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

In a press release, Rep. John M. McHugh, R-Pierrepont Manor, said that he is not surprised that the St. Lawrence River was named one of the most endangered rivers.

"As someone who was born and raised in Northern New York, I know well that a healthy river and lake are fundamental to the daily life and landscape of the region," Mr. McHugh said.

Mr. McHugh argued that Plan 2007 would do the river "far more harm than good" and urged the IJC to adopt plan B+.

"I believe that Plan B+, which has earned widespread support, best meets the needs of our river, our lake, and our communities," Mr. McHugh said.

He said that the state and its residents need to continue to put pressure on the IJC to make water management decisions that benefit the environment, the economy and local residents.

Alexander B. "Pete" Grannis, the state Department of Environmental Conservation commissioner, said American Rivers' decision to list the St. Lawrence River as one of the most endangered is "dead on."

"The St. Lawrence is at risk in part because the International Joint Commission is poised to botch a once-in-a-generation opportunity to return to more natural water flows in the river and Lake Ontario," Mr. Grannis said in a statement.

"Instead, the IJC wants to continue a river management plan that artificially constrains water levels — a plan that has turned half the once vibrant wetlands bordering Lake Ontario into impenetrable cattail stands," he said.

Mr. Grannis's statement said that if the IJC does not adopt plan B+, the people of New York likely will see the St. Lawrence River moving up in the rankings in next year's most-endangered report.

"The IJC spent \$20 million studying this issue for five years and developed an alternative, known as Plan B+, that would change the way the river and lake are managed, to benefit the environment, hydropower and other interests," he said. "At a minimum, the IJC should present this alternative for public comment well before it reaches a final decision, expected this summer."

Jennifer J. Caddick, executive director of Save the River, an environmental advocacy group based in Clayton, said she hopes the IJC will adopt plan B+ in the end.

"We hope this designation serves as a wake-up call for the IJC," Ms. Caddick said.

"It has been 50 years since the Moses-Sanders Dam was built and IJC is still stalling to do the right thing," she said.