A dam-and-lake flood control/economic development project on the Pearl River may be approved later this year. If completed, the lake may submerge a section of LeFleur's Bluff State Park. Two activists opposing the project talk about the park.

C. Todd Sherman 6:23 p.m. CDT April 7, 2015

A new dam and lake proposed by local government inspired environmental activists to name the Pearl River as one of the most endangered in the country on Tuesday.

The list of endangered rivers, compiled by the Washington, D.C.-based environmental advocacy group American Rivers, is based not on the current state of the river but on impending decisions expected later in the year that could adversely affect river health.

Groups concerned about the Pearl would like to see the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers shoot down a feasibility study/environmental impact statement sponsored by the Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District.

The project, proposed as flood control, would drastically alter the current state of the river south of the Ross Barnett Reservoir.

The project calls for creation of a dam 9 miles south of the existing Barnett dam that would in effect create a seven-mile artificial lake once additional dredging, widening and straightening of the river were complete.

The creation of the lake is the centerpiece of the Greater Jackson Chamber Partnership's Vision 2022 10-year strategic plan. The roots of the project stem from control measures to prevent floods like the one in 1979 that inundated Hinds and Rankin Counties and caused over $200 million dollars in damage in Jackson.

Critics said the flood control measures of such a project are unproven and have suggested that the project is more about the creation of prime-lakeside real estate that would be created around the lake rather than flood prevention.

Andrew Whitehurst of Gulf Restoration Network, one of the groups responsible for nominating the Pearl River as endangered, held a news conference at Mayes Lake in Jackson Tuesday with members of Jackson Audubon Society and the Mississippi Wildlife Foundation to highlight their concerns.
According to them, a lake would exacerbate problems already caused by the Ross Barnett Reservoir. They say dam operation and water evaporation contribute to deficits farther downstream and erosion from controlled releases has magnified the collapse of banks and contributed to shallowing as the sediments of that erosion settle in the channel. Those problems would be made worse by an additional body of water.

Furthermore, numerous groups including the Mississippi Commission on Marine Resources and one Louisiana parish council have officially made their opposition to the project known, citing their concern for the health of oyster beds and the salinity impact on other coastal fisheries downstream.

The project may also further damage habitat for endangered species such as the sawback turtle and numerous bird species. A northeast section of LeFleur's Bluff State Park would partially be submerged by a lake development. Christopher King of the Jackson Audubon Society called the park Mississippi's Central Park, a beacon of green for migrating birds going north and during the fall and winter. “If we don’t start preserving this type of area now,” he said, “by the time we figure out what the impact will be, it will be too late.”

The Rankin-Hinds Pearl River Flood and Drainage Control District released a response claiming factual errors to the American River’s designation statement and said they were disappointed that such environmental groups would promote an agenda with misinformation.

In response to the criticism, board attorney Keith Turner released a written statement Tuesday. "Any claims that the Ross Barnett Reservoir and the proposed river channel/weir project alternative will cause sediment and water quality and quality impacts downstream is unsupported by the facts and the results of various studies," Turner wrote

Also, Turner wrote that various studies have concluded that a lake would have a positive environmental impact not only for Jackson but for downstream as well.

Dallas Quinn of the drainage district said he’s surprised that environmental groups would be making a statement on a study that has not been released. "We are still tweaking the report," Quinn said. He said the report must go through two more official reviews. And the questions raised in those reviews must be addressed. There will also be a public review of the study later this year.

Whitehurst expressed concern about the legitimacy of the district's self-conducted FS/EIS. "They get to have all their own contractors. So I think it'll be different than the corps doing it, but we'll see," Whitehurst said his met with the district to suggest four alternatives to flood control including levees with pumps and flood buy-out programs for businesses and property owners.

Quinn stated that the primary goal of the lake project was and always has been flood control. "There are secondary benefits sure, but we have to conform to all the corps' rules, guidelines and regulations and state and federal environmental policy," he said. He added that alternatives were not cost effective and raised other problems such as backwater flooding.

Whitehurst disagrees. "They want a downtown lakefront for Jackson, which is economic development, with flood control second," he said. "Jackson needs flood control, but it can be done without digging a big lake," he said.

Whitehurst said that he and other environmental groups and government agencies will be rigorously examining the results of the study when it’s made public later this year.

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**Most endangered rivers, 2015**

American Rivers, a group that works to protect wild rivers, restore damaged rivers and conserves clean water, has ranked the following rivers as the country’s most endangered this year:

• 1. Colorado River in the Grand Canyon (Arizona): A proposed industrial-scale construction project threaten the Grand Canyon’s wild nature and unique experience that belongs to every American.

• 2. Columbia River (Washington, Oregon): Outdated dam operations are putting healthy runs of salmon and other fisheries at risk.

• 3. Holston River (Tennessee): Toxic chemicals from the Holston Army Ammunition Plant are putting local water supplies and the community’s health at risk.

• 4. Smith River (Montana): A proposed copper mine could harm a nationally-renowned wild trout fishery.

• 5. Edisto River (South Carolina): Excessive agricultural water withdrawals are putting water supply, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation at risk.
• 6. Cuitna River (Alaska): A proposed mine threatens to destroy 30 square miles of irreplaceable wild river habitat.

• 7. Rogue-Smith Rivers (Oregon, California): Strip mining, road construction, and metal processing would devastate this fragile, precious wild area.

• 8. St. Louis River (Minnesota): Mining could destroy or degrade thousands of square miles of pristine forested wetlands and streams.

• 9. Harpeth River (Tennessee): Sewage pollution and water withdrawals are putting clean water, fish and wildlife, and recreation at risk.

• 10. Pearl River (Mississippi, Louisiana): A new dam threatens to ruin healthy wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Source: American Rivers

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