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OHIO RIVER

THREAT: Pollution, climate change

STATES: Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois

AT RISK: Clean water for over 5 million people

SUMMARY

The Ohio River unifies 30 million people across 15 states, from New York to Mississippi. Protecting this precious resource is essential to ensuring the endurance of cultural identity, historical significance, biodiversity, vibrant river communities, and safe drinking water. But the upper river is threatened by industrialization and pollution, recently exemplified by the East Palestine train derailment. This ongoing chemical disaster underscores the vulnerability of the Ohio River and need for increased safeguards and durable funding for additional and continuous monitoring. To protect the Ohio River, Congress must designate the river as a federally protected water system and commit to significantly fund both the Ohio River Restoration Plan and Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission's technical upgrades.

THE RIVER

The Ohio River begins at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, flowing southwest and defining boundaries of Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois before flowing into the Mississippi River in Cairo, Illinois. The watershed covers more than 200,000 square miles and provides drinking water for over five million people.

The Ohio River is rich in Indigenous history and culture. The word "Ohio" comes from the Seneca name for the river, Ohiyo, which means "it is beautiful." Many ancestors of Native American descendants still living in Ohio today were forced to relocate. In addition to Native American history, the river also holds deep significance in our nation's struggle for justice from an African American perspective. A sign in Parkersburg, West Virginia reminds us that before emancipation, the Ohio River was the gateway to freedom for those enslaved south of the Ohio River. If you could cross the Ohio River, you had reached freedom. The river remains a significant historic site and a symbol of freedom.

In addition to its cultural and historic importance, the river provides critical habitat for 150 species of fish and the watershed protects endangered species such as the candy and diamond darter, several species of mussels, and crayfish. The rivers, streams and lakes are a source of recreation for communities throughout the watershed.

THE THREAT

The Ohio River Basin drains areas affected by environmental pollution from heavy industrialization, including mining and resource extraction for energy development, chemical production, and durable goods manufacturing. This history has resulted in significant discharges of toxic chemicals, including both legacy chemicals (such as mercury, dieldrin, PCBs, and dioxins) and chemicals of emerging concern (especially PFAS and Gen-X chemicals). These discharges, with associated carbon and methane

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emissions, threaten human and ecosystem health.

Pollution from disposal of coal ash and acid mine drainage also impact the watershed. Ongoing discharges from industrial, municipal, and agricultural sources remain a challenge as a decades-long effort to improve and sustain the river system continue. Despite measurable progress, two thirds of the river is listed as impaired for bacteria under the Clean Water Act. High levels of nutrients present in the river results in the formation of toxic algae outbreaks. The cumulative impact of all of this pollution threatens drinking water and public health, while also putting vulnerable communities at risk.

One example of the continued challenges occurred on February 3, 2023 when a Norfolk Southern train carrying hazardous chemicals derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, 16 miles from the Ohio River. This train was carrying at least five toxic chemicals. Of immediate concern was the vinyl chloride, a chemical used in plastic products. Fearing an uncontrolled explosion, Norfolk Southern chose to “vent” this chemical by burning the substance from 5 railcars. Additionally, butyl acrylate leaked into nearby streams that flow into the Ohio River. Soon after came reports of rashes and headaches, fish kills and animal deaths. Officials began tracking a plume of chemicals in the Ohio River in real time. ORSANCO, in conjunction and coordination with local and state emergency response officials and environmental agencies, stepped up to the plate to safeguard drinking water through monitoring and technical expertise. Unfortunately, ORSANCO is operating its staff and systems — including the organic detection system currently being used to navigate the East Palestine tragedy — on the same federal appropriation formula it received in 1972. Sustained increases in financial support for ORSANCO are needed to protect the communities and the environment in the Ohio River basin.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

This recent chemical tragedy underscores the precious value and vulnerability of the Ohio River. To protect the safety of drinking water for the 5 million people who depend on the river, ORSANCO requires robust, sustained funding to prevent disasters and pollution through immediate testing, long term monitoring, and technical expertise. Sustained funding is required for technical upgrades to their monitoring system and increases to staff capacity.

The Ohio River Basin Alliance (ORBA), a multi-state effort in partnership with hundreds of stakeholders across the region, is drafting a basin-wide restoration plan. The Ohio River Restoration Plan is a collaborative effort modeled after successful restoration projects such as the Federal Great Lakes Restoration Initiative. This “blueprint” presents goals, objectives and actions for general improvements to safeguard drinking water, support the ecological well-being of the river, and invest in quality of life for communities along the river. Members of Congress from across the Ohio River watershed must support the plan to designate the Ohio River as a distinct water system worthy of substantial federal funding to support its recovery, protection, and future value.