

Mo. River named among nation's most-endangered

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The Missouri River has been named number four on a list of the most-endangered rivers in the nation.

The announcement was made when American Rivers – an organization that works to restore rivers and streams in the United States – unveiled its annual list Tuesday.

“(The river is) a national treasure, and deserves to have some restoration and recovery work done on it to make it even better for recreation, healthier for fish and wildlife, and more beneficial to the people that live and work in the Missouri River Basin,” Paul Lepisto, regional conservation coordinator of The Izaak Walter League of America said at a press conference in Clay County Park.

The main reason the Missouri is on the list is “outdated flood management,” which may lead to a threat on public safety, said Jim Redmund of the Iowa chapter of the Sierra Club.

“The American Rivers chose the Missouri not so much because of the floods of 2011 as the way that our political leaders are responding with simple solutions to a complex set of river issues,” he said.

For example, a bill is now circulating through Congress that proposes the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manage the reservoirs to control a flood the size of the 2011 runoff.

“(The Corps) determined that even if you increased floodwater storage 30 percent, you would just take the top off of the flood of 2011,” Redmund said. “You’d still have 100,000 cubic feet per second, and that flow would last at least until November.”

Clay County resident and county commissioner Jerry Wilson said the area was able to avoid much of the damage of last year’s flood because it’s wider here, and relatively free-flowing.

It also has a connection with the floodplain, Redmund added.

“South of here, from Ponca and Sioux City south, we don’t have that,” he said. “So here is a model for how a greater portion of the river could serve its functions if it were allowed to operate as this section of the river has.”

Wilson said the main negative effect of the 2011 flood was that “there was widespread, unpermitted bank stabilization, some of it with unpermitted materials.”

These materials included such items as concrete, rocks and rebar, he said.

Local citizens and governments need to keep pressure on the Corps to require individual permits for the bankline stabilization that occurred immediately prior to the flood, Wilson said.

“These permits should require either the removal of inappropriate materials, or that (affected areas) be re-covered and re-vegetated,” he said. “Unfortunately, the Corps has indicated that they’re going to regulate material only below the ordinary high-water mark, which they define as about 40,000 cubic feet per second of flow.”

A new bankline inventory from the University of South Dakota Missouri River Institute shows approximately 43 percent of river frontage has been artificially altered, Wilson said.

“That’s a degree of armoring that could threaten the very values that got the Missouri designated as a wild and

scenic river in the first place,” he said.

Some of those values already were being threatened before the flood – both the water quality and the pallid sturgeon are in steep decline, said Marion Moss of the Nebraska Wildlife Federation.

Some reasons for the decline are habitat changes. More than 120 miles were eliminated during the navigation channel creation, and more than 500,000 wetland acres have been lost over the years as the channel was developed, Moss said.

This has led to lost connectivity in the floodplain and a “tremendous decrease” in sedimentation in the river, she said.

There also are emerging contaminants and other pollutants.

“Specifically the pharmaceutical hormones as you see in birth control pills and the hormone replacement therapy,” Moss said. Those kinds of drugs actually enter through the wastewater treatment plants, and then through the discharge into the river that enters our river systems.”

These pharmaceuticals may have contributed to a trend seen in male pallid sturgeon where they develop both male and female reproductive organs.

“I want to emphasize that the Missouri River serves as a drinking water source ... at least partially for most all the large cities along the way,” Moss said.

“So, these pharmaceuticals are ending up in our drinking water because there is no

method at this point of removal, either at the drinking water facility or the wastewater facility.”

Management of flows affects the sturgeon, as well.

“The Missouri River no longer has the high peaks in the springtime, and then dipping down into the low flows in the summer. It is a managed flow,” Moss said. “The water is managed for the navigation industry, which there is very little of north of the Iowa/Nebraska line.

“Nevertheless, it is still managed for flows, and that means there’s a constant flow all across through eight months of the year,” she said.

Both Wilson and Redmond said the local governments and citizens need to work with the National Park Service and other organizations to help conditions improve.

“Those of us who live along the Missouri River must remember that this is our national park, and we need to do two things,” Wilson said.

“First, we need to recognize, appreciate and protect the river for its inherent natural qualities, and second, I think we should recognize the vast economic development potential that this river represents for low-impact tourism such as canoeing, kayaking, hiking, birding, camping and other recreation along this stretch of the river.”

Redmund agreed, saying, “We must cooperate with the natural powers of the river and the floodplain – not feed

the illusion that we have tamed the Missouri. We have to stop treating the river as if it were a factory churning out goods and services. We have to

respect the river as a living entity here in this living environment.”

For more information, visit www.americanrivers.org/



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