ENVIRONMENTAL PR GROUP

FLORIDA

#8 PEACE RIVER

THREAT: PHOSPHATE MINING

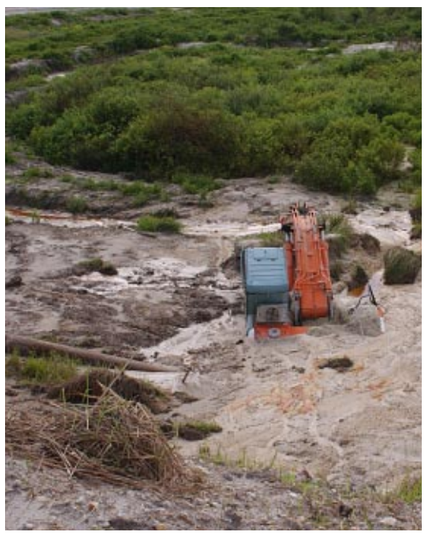
SUMMARY

Phosphate mining in the Peace River watershed has been the source of serious environmental problems for many years, and large new mines are planned. Florida's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) must take measures to safeguard the river and communities in the watershed from mining impacts, including protecting drinking water, and important tourism and commercial fishing industries.

THE RIVER

The Peace River begins in central Florida at Green Swamp and flows south 105 miles to the Charlotte Harbor Estuary. Fresh water from the Peace River is vital to maintain the delicate salinity balance in the estuary that hosts several endangered species as well as commercial and recreational harvests of shrimp, crabs and fish.

The river has always been a vital resource to the people in its watershed. Historically, the abundant fishery and wildlife supported Native American populations. Today, the Peace is an important source of drinking water, supplying some 6 million gallons of drinking water every day. The river is also an important source of economic vitality, providing tourism, recreation, and commercial fishing. During 1995-1996, these industries generated almost $4.5 billion and created more than 91,000 jobs in the watershed.



ENVIRONMENTAL PR GROUP

HUGE PHOSPHATE MINES ARE DEVOURING THE PEACE RIVER WATERSHED, LEAVING BEHIND UNSTABLE CLAY POOLS THAT PREVENT WATER FROM REACHING THE RIVER — UNTIL THEY COLLAPSE.

THE RISK

Phosphate is a growing export to China, where it is used in fertilizer, but the consequences of mining it are borne in the Peace River watershed. Phosphate mining companies bore and scrape huge pits up to 60 feet deep over thousands of contiguous acres. More than 180,000 acres have been mined in the Peace River watershed already, and mining corporations are now seeking permits for another 100,000 acres – an expansion of more than 50 percent.

One byproduct of the extraction process is clay, which is stored in settling ponds that eventually comprise more than 40 percent of a mine site. Some of these ponds can measure thousands of acres. Rain is trapped in these massive clay-laden ponds rather than soaking into the soil to replenish underlying aquifers. This reduces flows in the Peace River. Since the 1960s, the average annual flow of the middle Peace River has declined from 1,350 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 800 cfs. Most of this flow reduction is due to phosphate mining.

Each holding pond is a potential time bomb that threatens water quality, public health, wildlife and the regional economy. Dams restraining the ponds have burst or overflowed, sending a slurry of clay, containing uranium and radium, into the river, and coating the riverbed for many miles with a toxic clay slime that suffocates flora and fauna. One such incident killed 3 million fish. In 1971, two million gallons of phosphate waste swept into the river, causing a five-foot tide of slime that spread into adjacent pastures and wetlands. On some occasions, clay slime spills have prevented the Peace River Manasota Water Supply Authority from using river flows for drinking water, forcing counties to seek water supplies elsewhere or rely on stored supplies.

On at least 24 occasions, heavy rains have created sinkholes beneath the settling ponds. This caused the floor of the ponds to collapse, allowing mine waste to be released into underground aquifers.

THE 12-MONTH OUTLOOK

On May 10, 2004, a judge will examine the Florida DEP's decision to allow IMC-Cargill to expand the Ona Mine by 4,000 acres. The company has signaled that it may expand the site by an additional 16,000 acres beyond that at some point in the future. Charlotte County, the Peace River Manasota Water Supply Authority and conservation groups are challenging the DEP's permit for the mine. It appears DEP is poised to allow mine construction, despite the fact that an Environmental Impact Statement has not been completed for this project. DEP should reject the Ona Mine.

Charlotte County and conservation groups are challenging or monitoring at least five other phosphate mine proposals. These proposed mines and mine expansions total over 40,000 acres. DEP should deny permits for each of them.

After a three-year delay, SWFWMD is scheduled to set new minimum flow levels for the middle and lower Peace River in 2004. The large number of pending mine permits and their consequences for flows make it imperative that SWFWMD set minimum flow levels without further delay. The district should set minimum flows in the Peace River that will preserve and protect drinking water and fish and wildlife habitat. If SWFWMD attempts additional stalling, the state legislature should mandate that the decision be made in 2004.

Most of the Peace River was listed under the Clean Water Act as an impaired river in 1998, and the DEP has agreed to develop a cleanup plan for the river. DEP should resist pressure from phosphate mining companies and establish clean water management requirements that will lead to improved water quality in the river.

The Bush administration has halted a Clinton-era initiative to strengthen the Total Maximum Daily Load program in the Clean Water Act and has signaled that it will propose weaker regulations. The administration should not dilute this program, which is the Clean Water Act's primary tool for cleaning up waters like the Peace that are impaired by development, mining, and other land uses that generate pollution.

CHARLOTTE COUNTY VISITOR'S BUREAU

PHOSPHATE MINING THREATENS RECREATIONAL AND COMMERCIAL FISHING IN THE PEACE RIVER AND CHARLOTTE HARBOR

CONTACTS

SERENA S. MCCLAIN, American Rivers, (202) 347-7550 ext. 3004, smcclain@americanrivers.org
HONEY RAND, Charlotte County Commission, (813) 948-6400, honey@eprgroup.com
BECKY AYECH, Environmental Federation of Southwest Florida, (941) 322-2164
DENNIS MADER, HARDCAP, (863) 494-4687, rasayana@cyberstreet.com
GLENN COMPTON, ManaSota-88, (941) 966-6256, info@manasota-88.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO TAKE ACTION:
WWW.AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/PEACE2004.HTML