Center for American Progress

Idaho's Disappearing Rivers

by the CAP Public Lands Team February 2018

Note: *On April 9, 2018, the authors added policy recommendations to this fact sheet.*

Rivers are the lifeblood of Idaho. They irrigate crops, provide clean drinking water, serve as habitat for fish and wildlife, and fuel a $7.8 billion[1] outdoor recreation economy in the state.

But rivers are under immense pressure. As documented in the Disappearing Rivers analysis—the first comprehensive snapshot of the state of Western rivers—climate change, dams, development, and an ever-changing landscape are placing increasingly more stress on the waterways that are so inextricably tied to the health of Western communities and economies.

Across the West, nearly half of all rivers—49 percent—are modified from their natural state. That's more than 140,000 unnatural river miles, or enough to circle the earth nearly six times.

In Idaho, 33 percent of all rivers are altered.

That's equal to 13,766 unnatural river miles—enough to cross the state more than 45 times.

Of the 11 Western states in the Disappearing Rivers analysis, Idaho had the least altered rivers in the West. When broken down by size, 69 percent of all major rivers, 37 percent of all smaller streams and rivers, and 22 percent of all headwaters are altered.

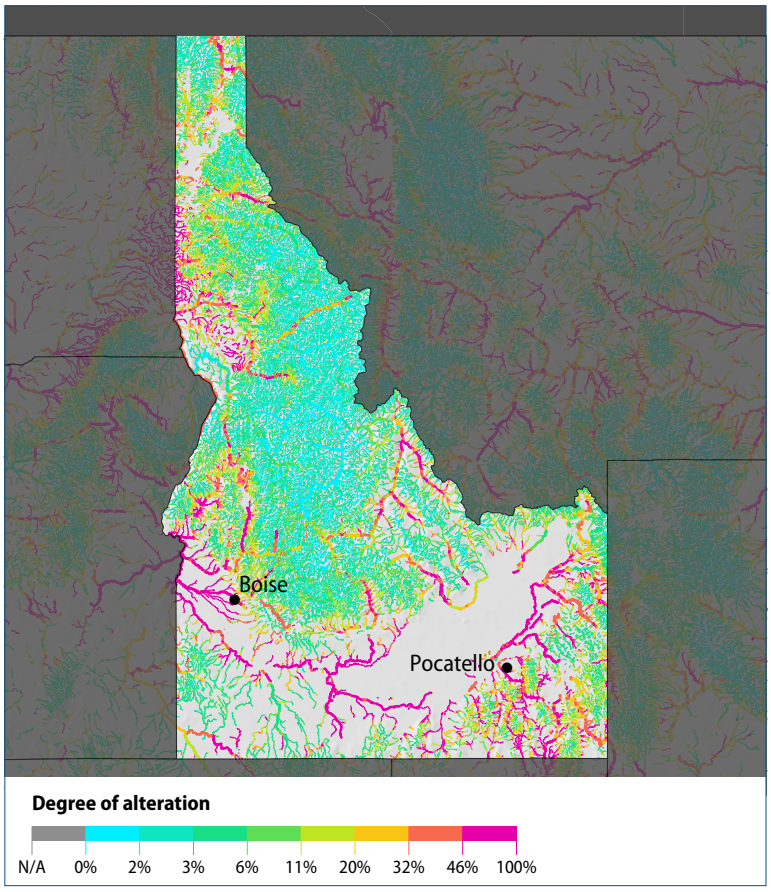

FIGURE 1

Unnatural rivers in Idaho

Modification by flow restriction and floodplain alteration

Share of headwaters that have been modified	Share of smaller rivers and streams that have been modified	Share of major rivers that have been modified	Share of all rivers that have been modified
22.2%	36.9%	69.2%	33.0%

Source: Dylan Harrison-Atlas and others, "Description of the approach, data, and analytical methods used to evaluate river systems in the western U.S." (Truckee, CA: Conservation Science Partners, 2017), available at https://disappearingwest.org/rivers/methodology.pdf.

In Idaho, three of the most-altered, major rivers are the Blackfoot River, the Boise River, and the Snake River, at 55 percent, 51 percent, and 49 percent, respectively.

River degradation is being driven both by development within waterways and in the surrounding floodplains. In Idaho, 11 percent of rivers no longer flow freely due to obstructions and development within rivers—most notably the 469 major dams in the state. Twenty-nine of rivers flow through lands that are significantly developed and altered by human activity.

Rivers also play an important role in Western economies. The Disappearing Rivers analysis found that watersheds in the West with the highest concentration of rivers drive 717 percent more outdoor recreation spending than those with the fewest rivers. In Idaho, this helps to fuel the state's $7.8 billion[2] outdoor recreation economy.

Despite the degraded state of rivers in Idaho and across the West, policies that promote conservation and protect public lands can have an enormous effect on water. The Disappearing Rivers analysis found that rivers that flow through protected lands are on average 50 percent more natural than rivers that flow through unprotected areas.

Recommendations

There are several actions that policymakers could take to conserve remaining natural rivers; restore damaged rivers; and protect the economic and ecological health of the state.

1. **Protect what's left of the large, natural rivers in Idaho.** Through the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and other tools that protect both land and water, the state should set an ambitious goal to prioritize protections for its 885 miles of major rivers that are natural and currently unprotected. The Idaho Legislature should establish a state river protection system to help accomplish this goal.

2. **Conserve and restore Idaho's headwaters.** The state should partner with federal land agencies, cities, and utilities to expand watershed restoration efforts, to direct consistent funding to projects that protect forest headwaters, and to attract investment from private firms to protect headwater resources.

3. **Rethink Idaho's river infrastructure.** The state must re-evaluate dams and flood-control infrastructure by modernizing necessary functions and restoring natural processes where built infrastructure is no longer a net benefit.

4. **Collaborate with private landowners in Idaho.** The state must prepare proactively for water scarcity and build on existing institutions such as the state water-banking system to make it easier to protect streamflows.[3] It should also continue to partner with federal agencies to support private lands conservation that restores rivers and streams for their benefits to healthy rangelands and species such as greater sage-grouse.

To explore the data, sources, interactive map, and the full project, visit DisappearingWest.org/rivers.

Endnotes

1 Outdoor Industry Association, "Idaho," available at http://outdoorindustry.org/state/idaho/ (last accessed November 2017).

2 Ibid.

3 Idaho Department of Water Resources, "Water Supply Bank," available at https://www.idwr.idaho.gov/water-supply-bank/overview.html (last accessed March 2018).