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# Southern Youghiogheny River

**STATES:** Pennsylvania

**THREAT:** Natural gas development

**AT RISK:** Clean drinking water,  
recreation

## SUMMARY

Despite recent improvements to river health, the Southern Youghiogheny River faces a critical tipping point in 2020. Beloved for its fishing, paddling and swimming opportunities, and drinking water supply for almost 75 municipalities, the Southern Youghiogheny is being overrun by natural gas development, including fracking wells, tanks, pipelines, freshwater pump operations — and a new power plant may soon get the green light. Unless Gov. Tom Wolf of Pennsylvania demands a thorough, landscape-scale assessment of potential impacts to this treasured river, the health and welfare of Western Pennsylvania's residents and visitors could suffer serious harm.



PHOTO: SCOTT TAYLOR

## THE RIVER

In the Algonquin language, Youghiogheny means “a stream flowing in a contrary direction,” a reference to the river’s unique northerly course. This part of the river has its roots in coal mining, logging and the nearby steel industry, and many residents were raised here by families who settled along its banks. Affectionately called the “Yough,” the river flows 134 miles north from West Virginia and Maryland to Western Pennsylvania, where it empties into the Monongahela River in McKeesport. Along its course, the river flows through forest, farmland and residential areas. The river is popular for whitewater kayaking and rafting, drawing paddlers from across the region to enjoy class II-III rapids. Downstream of the whitewater stretch, the Yough flows quietly through the Appalachian ridges parallel to the Great Allegheny Passage trail, passing wooded riverbanks, small towns and riverside parks. The section of the river that is best known for whitewater is locally referred to as the “Lower Yough.” South of the Lower Yough, as the river nears Monogahela River is the threatened area referred to in this report. Many communities along the Yough and GAP trail that were previously reliant on coal and industry have seen an economic transformation. The positive economic impact from outdoor recreation has created opportunities for restaurants, breweries and bed and breakfasts. Thanks to the Clean Water Act and the work of local volunteers, the river has rebounded from decades of industrial pollution, and now touts fantastic freshwater fisheries, including bass and stocked and native trout.

## THE THREAT

The Southern Youghiogheny River is threatened by current and proposed natural gas infrastructure, operations and leasing that could devastate the river’s fish and wildlife populations and clean drinking water for generations.

A vast network of large-scale drilling pads, wells and storage tanks are being built along both sides of the river’s steep terrain. Fracking sites will extract natural gas from the Marcellus Shale geological formation along the mountain slopes and tributaries. Historically prone to flash flooding and landslides, the land is now being further disrupted by fracking and earth

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# Southern Youghiogeny River

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## TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
LowerYough2020](http://AmericanRivers.org/LowerYough2020)



PHOTO: MOUNTAIN WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

work. Toxic waste from natural gas drilling is being discharged into nearby streams, yet operations continue despite dozens of unresolved violations flagged by Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection.

Meanwhile, a complex infrastructure of natural gas, electrical and water pipelines link hillside drilling sites to the river. Pumps draw 4 million gallons of river water daily for fracking on land owned by the National Park Service. Meanwhile, the conversion of public land to private use has not yet been approved by the federal government. In addition, a segment of the statewide 300+ mile Mariner II Pipeline is transporting 350,000 barrels a day of highly flammable natural gas fluids under the Yough.

Overriding the objections of most residents attending a December 2018 public hearing, Elizabeth Township rezoned a 147-acre parcel of rural and conservation land next to the Youghiogeny River and GAP trail for a 550-megawatt electric, natural-gas-fired power plant. Preparations are currently in process for submission of permit requests to state agencies. The discharge from the power plant into the river is projected to be thousands of gallons daily.

Finally, elected officials are leasing vast areas of the watershed to energy exploration and production. Local residents are left with more questions than answers based on the volume of permitting/rezoning actions, withholding of planning documents, numerous unresolved environmental violations and instances of circumventing federal law. Residents, as well as members of Protect Elizabeth Township and the Mountain Watershed Association, have repeatedly called on decision-makers to slow the pace of rezoning and permitting by engaging in thoughtful, landscape-scale environmental impact assessments, but their pleas have been ignored.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Gov. Tom Wolf can halt the threat to the Southern Youghiogeny by suspending permits, resolving outstanding violations, demanding thorough environmental reviews conducted by independent entities, and providing full public transparency of proposed actions. Gov. Wolf must call on his agencies and officials to weigh the irrevocable harm of operating a large, full-scale natural gas drilling and distribution operation on this fragile environment.